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THE EXCEPTION

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BY
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OLIVER GAYORS

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THE EXCEPTION

BOOK I

COTTERDALE

I

THE voice of the stream had hoarsened with the night's rain, and the pools of the rocky glen, that yesterday had been low and translucent, were brim full, peaty-brown, and clouded with the fresh. Yeasty skimmings had collected at margins, and where the stream took a deeper plunge, thirty yards below where Berice Beckwith lay, the great spumy cheeses revolved slowly at the foot of the fall. But already the water was fast clearing, and through the over-arching oak and birch and hazel the sun was shining again.

Near the mossy boulder on which Berice lay, a dead branch had lodged across a noisy rill. It had collected a little heap of water-rakings—mould, skeletonized leaves, glistening scum, and vegetable scurf. These fouled half the surface of the little pool above the branch; below it the water made a gleaming edge, combed clear. The removal of the branch would have hastened considerably the purification of the stream.

Berice's hand had been idly casting fragments into the pool, and her eyes had followed each morsel as it had been caught by the current and deposited against the rotten branch. There was quite a little cluster of soaked potentilla blossoms, the tiny cup-heads of mosses, and the flowerets of the bedstraws. An end of twig lay to her hand now; without

otherwise moving the hand she flicked it with her middle finger towards the pool. It was heavier, and went farther than the other fragments ; it struck the water at the foot of a twelve-inch fall, disappeared in the boiling, and bobbed up again a yard away. It spun for a moment where current and backwash met, and then, instead of descending to the miniature *barrage*, it moved slowly up to the fall again, again to be driven under. Time after time, a dozen times, it did this, as if guided by some unresting, invisible Hand. . . .

Berice's cheek lay on the sleeve of her knitted white sweater, and a fold of the garment ran across her back to the hip that was uppermost, where it merged into the fuller roll about her waist. The collar of the sweater came up her throat like a man's, and the spray of the stream, that swelled the lichens and made lush the mosses, had dimmed the thick coil of fair hair tucked away within it. That same spray, or some more secret moisture, had also made little wellings that filmed the light blue eyes that watched the circling twig.

The news that had caused this brimming had come the previous morning, sharply accentuating the unrest of weeks. Even in the roundabout manner of its arrival—the postman had given it to a housemaid, who had passed it on to the housekeeper—had lain an additional twinge. Had Skirethorns still been their own she and her uncle would have heard at least twelve hours earlier. But the new tenant was in the midst of his installation, knew his Cotterdale and Ridsdale neighbours yet only by name, and in all probability Berice and her uncle had been assumed to have already departed. Even in allowing so slight a thing to add to her moodiness Berice was aware that she was unreasonable to do so.

Her uncle, of course, had instantly had out the trap, and the pair of them had driven over to Undershaws, behind the hill in Ridsdale. The drawn blinds, seen from the turn of the drive, had been confirmation enough of the news. They would have left again immediately, reserving their call of condolence for another occasion ; but while they had been eating the sandwiches a maid had brought on a tray, eating them in silence in the darkened room where the sun coming

through the Venetian blinds made a bright ladder of light on the carpet, Mrs. Finch-Ommaney herself had entered. All at once it had seemed to Berice that her tower of prematurely white hair was more nearly indicative of her age than her still youthful complexion. She had been composed—a little theatrically composed, a little insistently occupying the centre of the stage and claiming her effect. In reply to the question in Everard Beckwith's eyes she had inclined her carefully dressed head: it was true. . . . Particulars? No, she had had no particulars yet; she had cabled for particulars, but the reply had said little except that a letter was already on its way.—What had it been: a fall, a landslip, a bursting barrel? Mrs. Finch-Ommaney did not know; Lal had had three months' shooting leave, had gone out to seek ovis-ammon, and this had happened on the very day before the end of his leave, or rather on the day before he was to have set off back again to his station. The *shikaree* (Hafiz, his name was, and he had accompanied Lal before, when he had shot those—the mounted heads of ibis and markhor and Thibetan gazelle that hung on the dining-room walls), the *shikaree* had returned to camp, presumably with . . . Mrs. Finch-Ommaney had covered her eyes with both plump hands, as if beseeching that they would not ask her to call that with which Hafiz had returned to camp 'her son.' No, nothing else; that was all the information to hand yet.—Berice and her uncle had stood with bowed heads before the bereft mother, and presently had moved to take their leave.

"Forgive me for not letting you know immediately," Mrs. Finch-Ommaney had then said, making a slightly obvious magnanimity of it that even in her sorrow she could think of others and their affairs. "I thought you'd already left, and that the new tenant was at Skirethorns."

Everard had replied that he was getting in now, and had given Mrs. Finch-Ommaney a timidly imploring look. Everard always took things simply, credulously, and as they appeared to be.

"And you—when are you leaving?" Mrs. Finch-Ommaney had continued, still with heroic selflessness.

Everard had answered that nothing was settled yet—that they were seeing Mr. Emney comfortable first—it might be a few days or it might be a fortnight.—Berice had interposed.

“How’s Celia?”

Then Everard had drawn a breath of relief that the unnatural tension had seemed to be over. At the sound of the name of her dead boy’s betrothed on Berice’s lips Mrs. Finch-Ommaney had trembled, put her hand to her bosom, and with the other hand had clutched at the arm Everard Beckwith had made haste to offer her. Gently they had led her to a sofa, and she had broken into a plenitude of tears.

“Oh, Berice, Berice!” she had sobbed. “*You* are my daughter—the girl I hoped—hoped—oh, I hoped—at one time I even thought——”

“Oh, hush!” Berice had murmured, shocked at the nakedness of the confession and refusing to hear any more. Already Everard Beckwith had made his escape. . . . Ten minutes later Berice had found him waiting for her in the trap, pulling at his long grey moustache and regarding the foot-board profoundly.

“She’s taking it badly, poor woman,” he had sighed when they were half way home.

Berice had made no reply. . . .

All this had been yesterday. Berice had spent half the night at her window, listening to the sound of the rain in the pinewood and occupied incessantly with one thought. That thought was, whether Mrs. Finch-Ommaney would have sobbed out those broken words if she had known all.

For seven years now her intimacy with the dead boy had been at an end, and nothing but his death could have brought it all so poignantly up again. Sitting there in the darkness at her open window she had lived much of those seven years over again. The heaviness of it all had come back to her—the days following the breaking-off, when she had come to herself again as if out of some blind trance of irresponsibility—the succeeding days, when half of her, defiant and self-justificatory, had warred with the other half that had more and more accused her—and so by stages to the days when the whole thing had seemed as remote and unreal as a dream of a

previous existence. She had gone over it all again from the beginning, sitting there in the dark.

She did not know even now exactly what it had been. It had been a sort of secret engagement, yet it had lacked the explicitness of an engagement. It had been a reckless plunge into Life, to be regularized or not at some later date. It had been a crude and rebellious intellectual conviction, coming upon her at her vernal season, unguided by any mother, finding a ripening word here or there in the novel-box, subtle urges in things which the better-disciplined would have shaken off, propinquity, the hour, and folly. She had tried to see it all again during the night: she had failed: she only knew, now, that the passage of those seven years seemed somehow to suggest a sort of Moral Statute of Limitations and (to give it that name) an automatic non-suiting of Nemesis. Even physically, so it was said, there no longer remained an atom of that old Berice Beckwith that had not been supplanted and renewed; and even less than nothing, were that possible, did there remain of that old Berice within. She had long since changed her mind about those sprawling, untrained impulses of her youth.

And now he was dead. . . .

Exclusive of a period of correspondence by letter, the whole thing had lasted barely four months—the four months between Lionel Finch-Ommaney's passing from Sandhurst and his attachment for a year to the Indian regiment. She had been eighteen months his senior, and it had been she who had made the running, he who had trailed a little stupidly after her. She had been precocious, and had considered herself entitled to make more than ordinary demands on Life; Life, she had assumed, owed her exceptional treatment by reason of her being Berice Beckwith: and, vaguely divining that they get most who give most, she had been willing to give, even to the point of squandering. And four months had sufficed to disillusion her completely. She had not received in the same measure; the revolting spirit in her had had to work double tides: it had not been in him to give as largely as she. Even when he had seemed to give he had but given her her own back again—her own thoughts,

expressed longings, gentle inventions, phrases even. In his deficiency Mrs. Finch-Ommaney's wish had been frustrated; and even in the interview of yesterday certain likenesses between the mother and the son had come out. In her heart she did not believe, with Everard, that Mrs. Finch-Ommaney was taking it insupportably badly. She knew the strain. Lionel had accepted his rejection, despite his half-hearted protests, with ovine content. . . .

But Mrs. Finch-Ommaney was ignorant of all this, and when, two years ago, Lionel had come home on leave, quite heart-healed, and had gone back again the betrothed of Celia Chester (Berice had made a prolonged visit to friends about that time), the mother had fretted a little (for Berice), rearranged her stage, and made herself potentially a grandmother through a different channel. She would not have broken out so yesterday, Berice thought, but for some fundamental insufficiency, some obscure subordination of what was true to what was dramatically storable . . . and immediately she frowned, to find herself anatomizing a fellow-being in the unguarded hour of grief.

Had Mrs. Finch-Ommaney known! . . .

But Berice had been over all this during the night, and weariness drives out emotion. Her thoughts turned of themselves to lesser things, of which these few remaining days at Skirethorns provided plenty. Her uncle lingered, giving supervision here and there, held by that good temper of his that was largely inertia; but Berice was anxious to get it over. The sooner the old order was completely at an end and the new one begun the better. Half a day would suffice for the packing of her own belongings. . . .

And the emotional drop was a relief in more ways than one. Even Lionel Finch-Ommaney's death might, she knew not exactly how, be counted among the things that brought relief. True, her whole nature would have revolted at the idea of considering Death's dread scission for one moment in its aspect of timeliness or convenience; but actually, practically, and emotional altitudes apart, his death did make things straighter. Only she knew how many times, in weariness and petulance and fret she had wished that

certain things might be terminated; well, here they were, terminated as far as they ever could be terminated, and there was nothing left but to concur. . . . Berice did concur. She even had a sudden, and hardly habitual, access of honesty with herself. She *did* feel lighter. There was nothing to be gained by denying it. It was God's will, and she acquiesced. It did not occur to her just then that acquiescence in God's will is a matter variable in its difficulty, the variability turning on the extent to which that will happens to coincide with our own.

Nor was the sense of relief incompatible with some measure, yes, a large measure, of sympathy for Mrs. Finch-Ommaney. It even enhanced that sympathy, as if to make some obscure and secret amends and pay a pound over rather than half an ounce short. For that accident far away in Thibet, whatever it had been—slip of the foot, bursting barrel, the trampling of an infuriated animal—had laid to rest other things than its immediate victim. In suppressing some things it had allowed others to take their proper place. *De mortuis . . .* she murmured the words . . . it was not merely that. It was not mere silence in regard to the unworthier things. Already things not unworthy were beginning to shine with a soft glamour. Lionel's memory had a tenderness that Lionel himself had never known, and enough remained of the gentle fount whence it sprang once more to moisten Berice's eyes as she gazed at the clearing stream—as she watched, through a bright blur, the soaked flowerets by the dead branch and the monotonous circuit of the twig up the backwash, down the fall, and up the backwash again. . . .

Well, it was over. She thought now that it had been sweet while it had lasted, to darling with eyes, even though the darlinging had been her own; at any rate it was already beginning to be sweet to remember it, all purged and idealized. One by one, as she lay gazing into the water, the memories returned to her—an unforgettable walk, a moving tone, an uncovenanted look so strangely thrilling, a reckless escapade of a meeting in the pinewood at dawn and a stealing back to the sleeping house before the morning star had paled, assignations at Bunny's painting cottage up on the moor . . . and, after he had left, the earlier letters. . . .

She remembered, too, the melancholy evening on which she had burnt his letters, those letters of an ardour so curiously kindled from her own. She had not realized then that the flame that had consumed them was the first refining fire of their intercourse, memory's real beginning after the false start of facts. And now Death, the last purification, had come, and the Lionel chapter was closed. . . .

But no: it was not closed if the loveliest part of it remained. It would yet end far far better than it had begun. Thenceforward it would be a sweet and supporting memory close at her heart. It would be, thenceforward, her standard of loveliness for all things pretending to be lovely, her touchstone with which all things fresh and gay and of the day-spring must stand the test of comparison. This at any rate she would take from Skirethorns with her. And Lionel had had to die to make it possible. That, perhaps, was what poets meant by brooding on Death until they fell in love with it. Beyond its bitterness lay peace and light, repose beyond its sharpness . . . but she felt herself getting into an exalted mood again, and ceased to think.

A bright ray had crept round until it rested on her cheek, and she moved. She sat up, and the folds of the sweater became a single soft roll about her waist. A mesh of subdued light danced about the boulder, and the little mat of flowerets showed dark on the lustrous pool. The end of the twig was still circling monotonously down the stream, up its margin, and down again. Her eyes rested on it, and at an idle fancy she smiled faintly. She knew that she had but to dislodge the dead branch and in a few minutes the pool would be clear again, even as her own life was now the clearer for the removal of something that had for long obstructed its current. . . .

Dallyingly she put out one hand to the branch.

She loosed one end of it, and with a plop and a gurgle half the mass went over the little fall. She cleared the other end, and, as it still stuck, pushed at it with her foot. It gave; the liberated water broke into a clear musical spouting, and in scarce more than a minute the pebbly bottom could be seen, with the minnows darting across it. Berice's bosom

rose as if a physical weight had been lifted from it, and she became aware of the singing of a lark. . . .

The new hopefulness in her breast demanded more air and space than were to be had in the narrow glen, and she rose almost blithely. Stepping from rock to rock she left the stream and began the ascent of a steep bank towards the hill-top and the sky. The sound of the stream diminished behind her; the air was clear and bright, and the earth smoked lightly with the morning evaporation from a million leaves and petals and grasses.

At the top of the hill she sat down again on a boulder of silvery limestone. About her were bents, with nodding harebells and potentilla, and over the pinewood below she saw the smoke of the Skirethorns chimneys. In her mind she saw the house itself—large and in ill repair, with its shabby, solid old furniture, its wildernesses of steep gardens, the shapes of trout roughly incised in its limestone cornerstones, and Berice's own birthday-heights notched against the edge of the gun-room door. And beyond all lay the hills that guarded the deep Dale, scarce less loved than the house itself.

Berice experienced no further emotion, although she knew that she was about to take her farewell of these things. It seemed fitting that all the changes should come at once. She sat for long, thinking nothing, feeling nothing, before she was aware of a step behind her and of a shadow on the grey-green bents. She turned. Harrison Emney, the new tenant, stood before her, cap in hand, dabbing his brow with a handkerchief.

II

HIS thin and poplar-like figure was clad in tweeds, not conspicuously new, yet lacking, as it were, that touch of the sun that turns the meadows to hay. Mechanically he glanced at the handkerchief with which he mopped his brow.

“ Good morning, Miss Beckwith,” he said, puffing. “ How frantically hot ! I’m afraid I’m a little too long in the back to mount these hills as your splendid Dalesmen do. Five-nine’s the useful height for a man—not my lankiness. . . . ”

It was characteristic of Harrison Emney that he made little modest disparagements of the good things that were his own. In this case his smile gave the cue that, at his hearer’s pleasure, his remark might be taken as pleasantly preposterous. Berice, looking away across the Dale, merely replied that it was hot—and steep—and that Mr. Emney’s new car would not be of much use up that hillside——

“ The runabout ? No, it’s hardly graded up to this. Am I disturbing you ? ”

“ Oh, no.”

He sat down by her side, mopping his brow once more and then putting the handkerchief into his pocket. Then he put his elbows on his knees, and with the fingers of his right hand began to make little flips on the knuckles of his left ; they were long and spare and reddish hands, and very carefully kept. Berice did not speak, and his own silence seemed, in some odd and negative way, to assume a degree of intimacy between them that made talking for talking’s sake unnecessary. He seemed to measure the duration of the silence before remarking, with an exaggerated stretching of himself :

“ And my landlord—your uncle—how is he this morning ? ”

Berice, hardly thinking either of her uncle or of the man who asked after him, replied that she hadn’t seen Everard yet

—that she had breakfasted alone and had then come out. “He may be up at the Pool,” she added.

“Ah, yes, the Pool; very likely; seeing to the stocking. The trout came yesterday—I shall finish in the poorhouse yet, Miss Beckwith! . . . But really, Mr. Beckwith’s so keen on the water and coverts that I think I shall have to try to get him to stay on as head keeper!”

The smile with which he made his little jest seemed less to come spontaneously than to be a result of the pull of the muscles that surrounded his mouth. Again it pointed the pleasantry, and again Berice was conscious for a moment of a thing she had noticed before in him—a slight overdoing of the right thing. To call that magnificent car “a runabout” seemed, somehow, excessive modesty in possession; and it would have been franker, less secretive, less *Scotch* (she applied the unreasonable adjective), had he said that he could really quite well afford to stock the Pool up the hill with trout and omitted the reference to the poorhouse. There was no reason why he should apologize for his wealth. She glanced at him. His general appearance was one of sandy irascibility, held well in check; his reddish moustache was waxed, and the brown irises of his eyes had a hot and reddish cast; and Berice, who hitherto had not spent a wonder on him, now found herself guessing his age to be about forty-two. He continued:

“No, I really don’t know how I shall manage without him, for I can’t make out half that Jacky and these fellows say. As a means of conveying anything to me their dialect is a distinct failure. But that’s by the way, for I hope you’re not thinking of leaving just yet. Pure selfishness on my part, Miss Beckwith, seeing what an excellent keeper I shall lose. . . .”

Had he ventured to add the gallantry his eyes looked, as to what he would lose when Berice herself left, she would hardly have noticed it, for the sight of the chimney-smoke above the pinewood had begun to tug just a little at her heart again. Perhaps the proximity of the new master had something to do with this.

“And, oh, that reminds me,” he continued. “I’ve a case of old crockery of some sort coming to-day that I should be

awfully glad to have your opinion on. I believe it's not a bad lot as such things go—cheap for what it is, my agent says—he's supposed to understand these things, and is honest enough as agents go. I think you save in the long run by dealing with a reliable man—fearful rascals some of them are—what's that they say? *Experientia docet*—I've been let in once or twice, and there's nothing like that for opening your eyes——”

His off-hand sentences merely deflected the current of Berice's meditation slightly. For a fortnight past the arrival of each fresh consignment of Emney's belongings had meant a rearrangement or removal of the old, and to Berice nothing could compensate for the changes. The Skirethorns things were old, but they belonged to Skirethorns. . . . She strove to hold off the returning ache by noting mentally that Mr. Emney seemed to be something of a thing-worshipper. She remembered that almost at their first meeting he had laughingly confessed that he found in his pictures and porcelains and bric-à-brac a sort of moral support—liked to have them about him—“his household *lares*,” he had called them, with the Latin word negligently dropped as if he did the honours of the language—and he was speaking now of a Hepplewhite sideboard. . . .

“But I really don't know that it's worth moving that magnificent old dower-chest for,” he was saying. “The dower-chest's oak, of course, and it's merely a personal predilection of my own—quite indefensible, you know—that makes me prefer the livelier woods, rosewood and mahogany—a matter of taste, of course——”

He ran on, taking, though she scarcely noticed it, a hundred things for granted. It was not the sound, but the sudden ceasing of his voice, that presently interrupted Berice's meditation. She turned with a gesture of apology for her inattention.

“I beg your pardon—I'm afraid I wasn't listening—you were saying something about a sideboard?——”

He might have replied that he had been speaking about a sideboard, five minutes before; but apparently he found something that he considered it better worth his while to say. A certain physical resplendence about her, a bouncingness

almost, had taken his eye ; he had noticed the height of her eighteenth birthday mark on the edge of the gun-room door—had asked whether he might venture to ask what those marks were ; and she could hardly, he thought, be more than twenty-six now. It was on his mind that he would very much have liked to pass the barrier of her reticence. . . .

All at once he dropped his eyes, and a sudden consciousness and embarrassment showed in his manner.

“ Do you know, Miss Beckwith, I’m afraid that after all I *do* disturb you,” he murmured, prodding at a harebell with his stick.

He forced her to repeat her apology.

“ Oh, I don’t mean just that,” he continued, digging away at the harebell until it was forced into the turf. “ I don’t mean that I’m in the way at this present moment ; I mean, that I disturb you by being here, in this place, at all. I’m afraid it’s my bad luck to be an intruder.”

She glanced at him.

“ Since we have to let Skirethorns it’s my uncle’s good luck that you did intrude,” she replied, looking away again.

“ It’s very kind of you to put it that way,” he returned, selecting another harebell to prod at, “ but—all the same—I am an outsider here, and naturally you feel it. The whole thing’s probably got a little on your nerves—quite, oh, quite naturally. Of course, in the case of my good landlord—whom I should like to call my friend also——”

Suddenly he stopped. Berice had again turned her eyes on him, at first uncomprehendingly, then steadily and inquiringly. She really did not quite understand him. In speaking of the thing at all he was rather rubbing it in ; not that it greatly mattered one way or the other, but . . . another man, she thought, would quietly have taken things as they stood, and have accepted the hostship of the house for which he paid rent without further remark. His slight eagerness to reveal himself puzzled her ; she was perfectly incurious about him ; and it was certainly without reflection, and perhaps still under the influence of her emotion of an hour before, that, seizing on a word for lack of anything better, she inquired in a detached voice :

“Why will you call my uncle ‘your landlord’?”

The careless words had not escaped her before she was suddenly conscious of what she had done. She bit her lip as the explanation of it all flashed upon her. She had noticed it before, of course, taking him in much as she had taken in the car and the sideboards and the packing-cases that had come addressed to him; but she had accounted him, like them, merely as something new and to be seen no more after a week or two, and had gone on to think of more interesting things. She now reddened like a peony for what she had said.

“I mean—I mean—of course he *is* that,” she stammered.

This was worse, and she stopped again, red to her blonde nape. . . . She could only hope secretly that he was as thick-skinned as he seemed to be.

He was not. His face, too, had turned to a harsh and painful red. The thing was annoyingly trifling; had she not drawn attention to it by suddenly checking herself it might have passed unnoticed; but it held more than a trifle of mortification for him. She did not know that it struck at so much that he had laboriously built up, piece by piece. She did not know—she was just learning—that it seemed to suggest that something *was* a building, and not a growth. The man who, doing nothing, would yet have it taken for granted that if he did something it would be infallibly the right thing, makes innumerable falsifications by doing one wrong one. Breeding may be manifested largely by negations, but it is not itself negative. A thing is not negative when the breach of it is everything. . . . They sat on the boulder side by side, both ashamed, he to have had his guard shot under, she not to have seen at once and schooled herself better.

And even then a little unguardedly generous impulse prevented her from seeing that the less that was said the sooner the thing would be mended.

“I’m sorry,” she breathed, the blush still bright on the cheek above the white sweater.

That more irascible red was slowly fading from his own face. He was gazing down between his feet, and the toes of his boots rose and fell softly. Feeling herself unobserved, Berice stole a sidelong glance at him, and saw how near his

vanity, if it was that, she had come. She could almost have put a soothing hand on his sleeve. Berice Beckwith frequently made faults; she always atoned for them tenfold.

"Forgive me," she breathed again, again averting her eyes.

Still Emney did not reply. Not the prick she had given him, but the stab she might have inflicted, held him silent. And more than the wound was that she should have seen that he was wounded. He was as thin-skinned as she had hoped he might be callous. She had not only caught him with the social primer in his hand, but he had let her see that he recognized that she had caught him. . . .

But perhaps, he found himself thinking, she had *not* seen that. Perhaps his sensitiveness had been quicker than her perspicacity. If so, he was making an admission even now. It was not Harrison Emney's way to make admissions, and already he was recovering the mastery of himself. He had wished to penetrate her reserve; well, he had his wish. Whatever it might be necessary to cede or defend later, for the present he had an advantage. He was his ordinary colour again now, and the hot and shrewd brown eyes under the slightly wrinkled lids that met Berice's blue ones had the humouring and masterful expression of the man who has a matter well in hand.

"Forgive?" he repeated slowly, sitting upright again. "Forgive what, Miss Beckwith? What's this I'm asked to forgive?"

She was silenced, seeing too late, as she ever did see, that it would have been better to have let not-very-well alone. He pressed his advantage.

"If there's to be forgiveness, it is *I* who should ask it," he said, smiling. "Here I come, an interloper in a place where you and yours have struck roots—" (Berice wondered why he would still linger on this perilous ground), "—I turn the place upside down and ask you to take a spectator's interest in the process—I go meddling with things that must in a way be sacred to you—and Miss Beckwith begs my pardon! 'Pon my word, it's rather comical!—"

Whatever else he was or was not, he was readier and quicker to seize a tactical advantage than she; but Berice,

seeing the instantaneousness with which he had closed up again that minute chink in the exterior he presented to the world, merely noted tardily that he was no less sensitive. The combination, now that she did give it attention, was rather interesting, and explained the fondness of the senior partner of the house of Wade, Sons, and Emney, bankers, for *bibelots* and bric-à-brac. He had risen from the boulder, seeing her rise, and apparently proposed to accompany her down to the house; and—whether from lack of tact or in order to fence himself still further she could not discover—he again approached the hazardous subject.

“Seriously, Miss Beckwith,” he said, “I’m not quite sure whether you’re altogether fair to me. You see, merely as a new-comer I’m at a disadvantage here. It’s not my fault, and—if I may say so—it stands between us. You’d resent anybody else just as much, you know, but here it is, all visited on luckless me. It’s not quite fair, is it?”

He merely puzzled her again. She did not see how anything could stand between where no relation, or almost no relation, existed. But it didn’t matter. And perhaps from his point of view it—whatever “it” was—was *not* quite fair. Certainly, though it was the last thing she had intended, and would hardly happen again in ten years, a word too much *had* escaped her, and perhaps she owed him something for that. To be quit of the debt she pointed out to him, as they descended towards the pinewood, this and that feature of the Dale below—the path over the opposite hill to Ridsdale, Cotterdale village a couple of miles away, and below it, near the bridge where Ridd and Cotter met, the disused mill that was to have made her uncle’s fortune but had somehow failed to do so. Emney expressed a curiosity to see this mill; and Berice completed her reparation by promising to show it to him.

III

THE trout pool lay four hundred feet above the house, at the edge of the heather, not far from where the chain of horse-shoe butts began that stretched for a couple of miles to the confines of Sir John Hartopp's land ; and it was there, that same evening, that Berice and her uncle stood looking across the water. The clumps of heather were turned to a rich low bronze ; over a roller-like heave of the moor the flushed fell-tops across the Dale could be seen ; and the Pool was an oval well of pure light, immeasurably deep as the zenith it reflected.

At the beginning of the ascent Everard Beckwith had put his briar pipe into the pocket of his greatly-loved old shooting-jacket ; he drew it forth again, slowly charged it from his tattered old pouch, and the little inverted flame of his match burned clear in the Pool below. The illumination showed also, very minute, in his puckered blue eyes. He was big and slow-moving ; years of pottering about in all weathers, deeply interested in such matters as gate-fastenings, insecure branches, and the condition of walls and hedges, had tanned his face and wrinkled his neck like those of a field labourer ; and they had also left him with an intermittent rheumatism, against which he carried a raw potato in his breeches pocket. When he spoke it was in a rich and lazy and contented voice.

"They're rising well to-night, Berice," he remarked, as the tranquil surface of the Pool was broken by the splash of a leaping fish. "Awfully still up here."

"Jolly," Berice murmured absently, her eyes on the widening ripples.

"Look, there's a big chap. . . . We put four hundred in to-day. I must say Emney's doing the place uncommonly

well. He could hardly do more if I'd sold the place to him, as he wanted me to. But we can't sell Skirethorns, eh, Berice?"

Berice made no reply, and for a minute they stood watching the water and the darkening leagues of heather.

"Very hospitable to ourselves, too," Everard Beckwith continued. "Glad of somebody to talk to just at first, I suppose. But Hartopp and Knowles will be looking in on him soon . . . seems a pleasant sort of chap . . . he ought to get along all right with them . . ." he drawled equably along.

"Yes," Berice replied; and then asked suddenly, "When are we leaving?"

Everard took his leisure to think, watching his tobacco smoke that curled in the golden light.

"Oh, we must clear out pretty soon, but we can't decently just this minute, with him spreading himself so on the place," he said. "There are half a dozen odds and ends to settle yet, and he was speaking this afternoon of the other ponds—you know—down there—the old scheme——"

Berice looked at her uncle quickly and suspiciously.

"What? . . . Ev, you don't mean that you've been talking to him about *that* old jacket?"

"The ponds?"

"Yes."

Everard blew another cloud of smoke out over the Pond.

"Why not? Same old jacket, Berice. His suggestion, of course, not mine. I'd happened to get those old drawings we made, you and Bunny and poor Lionel and I, and he came in and wanted to know what they were—I must say he seemed rather taken with the notion. And when you come to think of it it's really not half a bad idea. As he said, it *is* the dickens of a pull up to the top here—you remember what a job we had to get up the last skating. . . ."

In explanation of the word "jacket" as Berice and her uncle used it, it may be said that it was a term Berice had applied to any project of her uncle's that resembled, from the point of view of practical usefulness, the skinning of a flint to make a jacket for a gooseberry. Everard Beckwith

had a genius for these jackets. The plans he had elaborated a dozen years before for the reopening of the lead mines on the moor for the purpose of extracting silver from the baser product had been a jacket; an attempt to grow corn on a piece of cleared land below the stream had been a jacket; and it had been a jacket when he had built the mill by Cotterdale Bridge for the revival of the old Cotterdale homespun industry. Jackets of one sort and another in the past had been largely contributory to the present letting of Skirethorns to a stranger. The jacket of which they now spoke was the old proposal for the making of a pond, or rather of a couple of ponds, much further down the hill and more easily accessible from the house.

“It’s really half done without a spade being put to it,” Everard continued cheerfully. “There’s sixty yards, nothing but rush, and a good clay bottom. I’ve shown you many a time the patch of mist that always hangs over it at night. A little digging, and then turn the stream. . . .”

The kind, impracticable eyes seemed to see the jacket already finished, somewhere away in the clear twilight. . . .

But Berice spoke with decision.

“Ev, he mustn’t be allowed to do it.”

He gave her a questioning look.

“Why not, my dear? It would really be very well worth doing—besides being a rather interesting job——”

“So were the others, and you know how they ended. We reckoned up that it would cost quite two hundred pounds. We can’t afford that for a jacket, and we’re not so poor yet that we’re going to let a stranger pay for it. Besides, you’d never leave till it was finished.”

With an equable sigh Everard relinquished the jacket.

“Oh, all right, Berice. Perhaps you’re right. Perhaps the corn-growing *was* rather a sunbeams-from-cucumbers sort of idea. But I still believe the homespun business might be made to go. The fact is, Berice,” he expounded cheerfully, “we’ve got to wake up—our sort, I mean. We’re getting left nowadays. Look at this man Emney, now: a banker, in the thick of things, money spinning about him all the time—always within sound of the chink of it; *he’s* the successful

modern type, and it's just rubbish of us to pretend that we wouldn't do the same thing if we could. No. Feudalism's dead. I'm sorry myself for some things, but there it is. Of course, there's the fag-end of a sort of traditional pull yet, but we must use it—wake up, in fact. There, now!"—he extended his hand in pleased triumph as a sheep raised its head from a clump of heather and gave a call—"there's an instance of what I mean. Wool. There's wool, here on these moors; the labour hasn't all gone off to the towns yet—there's Joe, and young Brooke, and those two lads of Harry Dean's,"—he spoke as if he hadn't by any means named all the labour that was even yet to be had—"and for the market, what I have in my mind is one of these *good, small* businesses, you know, with the right sort of people,"—puff, puff—"such as this man Emney,"—puff, puff—"who'll pay thirty shillings as soon as a guinea—and as you know, a little extra in the price makes all the difference between a profit and a loss"—puff, puff, puff. . . .

"The homespun jacket, in short," Berice summarized; and again they watched, without speaking, the rising of the fish.

But suddenly Everard stood peering under his hand across the glowing heather.

"Hallo, who's that?" he said. . . . "If Bunny wasn't abroad I should have said it was Bunny. . . . It's somebody with Bunny's dog, anyway. . . ."

In the rich hazy light an approaching figure could be seen. Suddenly Berice gave a call, and a red setter bounded through the heather and leaped and barked about her.

"It's Bunny right enough. . . ."

"Down, Nell! . . ."

"Yes, it's Bunny—and it's good-bye to Jim Bright's chances of winning the fell-race this Feast. . . . Hallo, Bunny, what are you doing here? We thought you were painting in Paris."

Bunny was Bernal Hartopp, Sir John Hartopp's son. He was a stockishly but springily built young man of thirty-three, and in Ridsdale and Cotterdale, where the most that is ever said for that form of passing the time that consists

of the putting of paint upon canvas is that it is difficult to see what harm it does, he was known as the best sprinter and jumper in the neighbourhood, and the only man capable of beating Jim Bright in the yearly race up and down the Fell where Ridsdale and Cotterdale met. Only a pair of French-made boots indicated that he had recently arrived from abroad; and the evident capacity for quick and supple movement of the feet and ankles within them only made the more marked the slowness and embarrassment of Bunny's speech. He gave Berice a short "How d'you do?" and then turned to her uncle.

"My father tells me I only just catch you," he said.

"A few days yet, perhaps—not much longer," Everard replied, solicitously examining the fingers that Bunny's handshake had crushed. "I hope you don't shake hands with women like that, Bunny."

"He's Emney the banker, isn't he?"

"Yes. Do you know him?"

"No. I've only heard of him as a buyer—of pictures and so on. He knows Keigwyn and Bartholomew and that lot. I hope he doesn't bring 'em down here; if he does I shall clear out again."

Everard Beckwith laughed.

"Two of a trade, Bunny, eh? What a jealous lot you artists seem to be! Well, well. . . . Of course, you've heard of poor Lionel?"

"Yes."

"Very sad. An awful blow to Mrs. Finch-Ommaney."

"I'm afraid so," said Bunny.

"And to Celia too, poor girl."

Bunny did not reply. He seemed even more than usually parsimonious of his words. A minute had passed before he made a slow, careful, and for him a lengthy pronouncement.

"I expect when the truth's known we shall find he'd his own carelessness to thank. There never was such a careless young beggar—threw himself and his things about anyhow. I remember when he used to come up to my painting cottage over there to read: cartridges among my paint tubes, his 'Minor Tactics' turned into a fly-book, and letters and

papers all over the place. I used to pitch into him about it. Of course, it didn't matter . . . there. . . ."

He stopped again. Bunny very quickly talked himself to a standstill.

Berice stood a little apart, playing with the ears of the setter, trying not to admit to herself that the way in which Bunny talked only to her uncle was rather marked. She was fond of Bunny, but it was a long time now since Bunny had shown himself very fond of her. For the last year or two, whenever he had gone off on his wanderings, he had not taken the trouble to seek her out to say good-bye to her, and now that he was back again he all but ignored her. She fancied somehow that Bunny would talk more freely were she out of the way.

"Have you come back to run at the Feast, Bunny?" she called out presently.

"Not specially for that," Bunny replied, turning his head for a moment.

"Shall you run?"

"I don't know."

"Well, we shan't see you if you do," she persisted.

"I suppose not."

His brevity amounted to surliness. Berice bit her lip, and then stretched herself. Very well—if he didn't wish to talk to her he needn't.

"I'm going down, Ev," she announced. "I suppose you're stopping a bit?"

"A little while. I don't feel like turning in yet."

"Good night, then. Good night, Bunny."

"'Night," said Bunny; and in a minute or two Berice had disappeared over the brow. The two men stood side by side, smoking.

Presently Everard spoke.

"Why shall you clear out if these fellows you spoke of come?" he asked. "You're always coming back and clearing out again nowadays."

Bunny looked at the ground.

"Who? . . . Oh, the fellows I was speaking of: Bartholomew and Keigwyn! Because I simply can't stand 'em, I

suppose. Keigwyn's a clever painter, and as low a devil as you'd find. Bartholomew's a poet, and I know nothing about him except that he's a Jew and I don't like him. I don't know how much Emney knows about 'em: I suppose they're on their best behaviour when there's a buyer about."

Everard laughed.

"H'm! Well, you seem a queer crew. . . . The trout look well, don't they? They're Emney's putting in. I suppose you don't care to come down and see him before your father's called?"

"No, I think not, thanks," Bunny replied, filling his pipe again.

Berice's guess, that Bunny would probably talk more freely after she had left, seemed on the point of being fulfilled. He was big with morose meditation now. He moved the French boots this way and that among the heather, seemed on the point of breaking out, checked himself, and then did break out.

"If you've a minute," he said stammeringly; "it won't take long—there's something I—I should like to ask you."

"No time like the present, Bunny," said Everard contentedly. "What is it?"

"It's about—it's about young Lionel."

"Oh? . . . What about him?" Everard asked, suddenly more attentive.

"You heard what I said just now—about his being careless and all that——"

"Yes," Everard prompted, as Bunny stopped again.

"Well," Bunny blurted out, "well . . . well, he was. Beastly careless. I've been putting my cottage straight for work this afternoon, and there's heaps of his stuff there yet . . . I found a lot that must be years old, stowed away in a bag. Of course, the place is kept locked, nobody ever goes in, and it really doesn't matter . . . and as far as that goes I haven't fairly looked at the stuff myself yet . . . but this is what I want to ask you: You don't think, do you, that when I do straighten up I oughtn't to—well, to use my discretion, in case . . . supposing there should happen, that is—not that I've really

any reason to think so, you understand, but you never know . . . and it can't possibly do any good to leave stuff about. . . ."

Everard Beckwith pulled at his moustache.

"I'm afraid I don't quite follow you, Bunny," he said slowly.

"What I mean is," Bunny ploughed on, "that—well, he never thought when he went away the last time that it would end like this. If *I* were to go out suddenly like that . . . we all have private things, you know . . ."

Everard's face had become continuously graver as Bunny had floundered on. Again he dragged at his moustache.

"Do you mean poor Lionel owed money?" he asked, as Bunny again came to a standstill.

Into Bunny's eyes came a quick look of gratitude that the older man had done nothing whatever to deserve. He caught eagerly at the suggestion.

"Well, say he did. It isn't telling tales—to you—but I know for a fact that he dropped quite a lot over one Cambridgeshire. It doesn't matter now. What I really want to know is whether you think it would do any harm just to—tidy up a bit. It's been rather on my mind, and you're older than I——"

Then there rose between Everard Beckwith's eyes and the darkening moor a picture—a picture of a darkened room, with a ladder of sunlight lying across the carpet, and a grief-stricken woman with towering cendré hair whom he had sprung forward to save from falling. He, too, in his plain way, thought of things of which Death is the termination—carelessness, folly, rashness, sin. More than once he had suspected that Lionel had gambled; and no good end could be served by remembering it now. There was Celia to consider too. . . . An empty sucking sound came from his pipe. He turned to Bunny.

"I see," he said quietly.

"And you'd——?" Bunny asked, with curious eagerness.

"I think I'd—do as you suggest."

"Burn things, if I think it's necessary?"

"Yes."

Again Bunny gave him the grateful look.

“I’m glad you think so. No good the other way—not a bit of good—no good at all. . . . Going down? I’ll walk with you as far as the wood——”

Half-way to the wood Everard gave a deep sigh in the darkness.

“Poor Lal!” he murmured.

Bunny’s face, could it have been seen, would have shown far less than Everard Beckwith’s of either sympathy or gentleness.

IV

HARRISON EMNEY reminded Berice of her promise to show him the mill by the bridge by remarking tentatively, two days later, shortly after breakfast, that, of course, any other day would do equally well for the expedition. . . . Berice instantly professed herself at his service. He made a deprecating gesture—wouldn't hear of it—had meant no hint . . . with the result that at half-past ten they were taking the steep path down the plantation that cut off quite a quarter of a mile of drive. Emney appeared, by turns, a little eager to talk and a little inclined to drop into protracted silences; and he excused the jerkiness of his mood by a jesting remark about "never being himself till lunch-time." By and by he had found a safe subject for talk in the errand that had brought them out.

"I was always under the impression," he said, as he followed her down the rough path, sometimes starting forward to put a branch aside for her, "that this hand-weaving was done in the cottages, and brought to the mill only to be dyed or finished, or whatever it was called."

So it had been; but it seemed to Berice that the admission would have involved a criticism of her uncle's ideas of business which she did not wish to make. She answered evasively that the cloth had been sent elsewhere to be dyed, but that the mill had a special adjunct for fulling. "We'll go this way," she added; and he held the gate open for her to pass out. They took the road that follows the Cotter, now approaching its banks, now leaving it to wind among its shallows a quarter of a mile away. Presently, when he had fallen into her stride, he found himself mentally remarking that it would do him no harm were he to walk rather more frequently at her pace. . . .

It was as they were passing under a bank of elders that Emney cleared his throat apologetically, and again hoped that he was not trespassing on her leisure and good nature.

"I've a reason for mentioning it," he said. "It was awfully good of you to let me chatter to you the other morning, for I know now how I must have disturbed you. . . . Very sad, very sad. If I'd had the least idea then I wouldn't have bothered you for the world. It came of my being a stranger, you see. . . ."

Berice looked at him for a moment before she quite understood; then his meaning occurred to her, and she looked away again.

"I suppose he was a great friend of yours?" Emney continued by and by, in a subdued voice.

Berice replied that she and Lionel Finch-Ommaney had known one another since childhood. He nodded sympathetically.

"Very sad, very sad. . . . He leaves a mother and a fiancée, I'm told?"

"Both."

"And so young! Very, very sad. Joe Warry told me. A fine young fellow, Joe says——"

Berice murmured something, and then suddenly lengthened her stride a little. The quickening of the pace served the purpose for which it was designed; Emney was a little put to it to hold his own, and very little further talk passed between them until they reached the bridge.

The mill, a long, chapel-like building with tall round-topped windows, lay along the opposite bank of the river, with the wheel-house forming an angle at the lower end of it. The stream had been partly banked to make a dam, and at the other end of the narrow stone footway stood the caretaker's cottage. The caretaker himself, a small wrinkled man of fifty, in a pair of Everard Beckwith's cast-off breeches that reached almost to his shoulder-blades, was crossing the mill-yard with a bucket, and he turned, hearing Berice's call above the rushing of the mill-race.

"That's Rufus Kershaw," Berice said to Emney. "He's not very much liked since he ran the water off from under

the ice one winter when they were skating. . . . Get the key, Rufus, and come and show Mr. Emney round the mill."

The caretaker set down his bucket, disappeared into his cottage, and presently reappeared with the key. He crossed the yard and opened a door under an outstanding crane-arm, and they entered the mill.

Harrison Emney had enjoyed his rather breathless walk; he anticipated a no less enjoyable walk back; and he was quite well-disposed towards the looms that had furnished the occasion. These stood, a dozen of them, each as large as a cottage room, six of a side down the large mill-chamber; and, as well as he could distinguish in the half-light that came in at the villainously grimy, round-topped windows, one of them was kept in order for purposes of demonstration. Rufus had already placed himself on the seat of this, and was well into the recital, in barbarous dialect, that brought him in stray shillings from visitors.

"These is t' looms," his jargon ran. "T' galley-baulk o' this 'un were what owd Webb hinged hissens on—ye'll see t' heuk o' t'ither side. T' sweeds is ash, thro' Ridsdale Top, and them's t' healds i' them secks. These is t' truddles, and t' shuttle goes i' t' box there. Yon's what they call t' dolly-box; ye'll see t' dollies ditherin' up an' down in a minute. They niver warked of a Monday—t' weyvers, ye knaw—that wor' t' drying-off day, an' they livered in of a Friday. . . ."

It was Berice who laughed the first, at the dismay on her companion's face.

"I suppose that's a failure too, as a means of conveying anything to you?" she remarked, remembering that he had said that the speech of the comparatively civilized keepers had puzzled him.

"Please pity me, and translate," he implored. . . . "Well," he added, when she had picked the kernel out of the shell of Rufus's dialect, "Bartholomew warned me that if I came here I should go back to the brutish state. I begin to see what he means."

She asked who Bartholomew was.

“ Bartholomew ? The poet ? Haven't you read his *Aubade* ? ”

“ I'm afraid not.”

“ Nor the *Gestes Paresseuses* ? ”

“ No. I suppose I'm in the brutish state too.”

“ Oh,” he exclaimed, “ you must let me lend them to you ! They're good—quite good. They're in English, of course, but he's had the happy idea to go back to the Provençal dawn for his titles and inspirations. ‘Dews of the land where Dante lay exiled’—that's from his *Val d'Enfer*, I think. Oh, the *Aubade's* full of romance ; do let me lend it to you ; and if at any time you should care to meet Bartholomew himself . . .”

Berice replied that for the present she would commit herself no further than to read his book, and added that in the meantime, since he found Rufus on the hand-loom so little intelligible, she would show him the mill herself.

He asked no better. His first glance round that tomb of Everard's hopes had shown him the futile experiment it all was and the nature of the brain of the man who had hoped for anything from it ; and a smile twitched about his lips. So much for his landlord's notions of modern business ! As for this large, fair, ripe, handsome niece of his, so she but showed him round she might talk of antiquated cloth-processes or of whatever else she pleased. The bright hair under her shallow hat of straw seemed, in that dingy, cobwebby barn of a place, to gather and hold the light like a primrose in the dusk ; the thinness of her simple blouse—she wore neither cloak nor jacket—irresistibly attracted his eyes ; and a fresh and natural savour seemed to hang about her. He had been a busy man all his life ; but he had worked always to an end that was something more than business ; and he was rich, and barely forty-three. . . . The smile still lingered about his mouth. . . .

Looking up, she misinterpreted his smile. She had been continuing that which Rufus had begun ; suddenly she stopped. The faintest trace of pique showed in her next words.

“ Of course, it didn't pay,” she remarked, as if she made

him a present of that. He might also gather, if he wished, that she did not consider the last word had been spoken when it had been shown that it had not paid.

"Eh? I beg your pardon. . . ."

"And," she continued quickly, betraying the faith in jackets that lurked obscurely in her own blood, "it is a fact that they've tried all manner of substitutes for the old-fashioned natural teasel-thistle, and haven't found a mechanical thing that will really do."

Only for a moment did he seem puzzled; the next he had made a guess at her meaning. She *had* been speaking of teasel-thistles—whatever they were. . . .

"Ah, yes," he nodded, "for the cloth; I see; but really this is exceedingly technical. However, perhaps it won't seem so far above my head when we've seen the rest of the mill. . . ."

"You needn't wait, Rufus," said Berice; "I'll bring the key when we've finished."

She began to pass along between the dusty looms, explaining as she went the obsolete economy of the mill.

He followed her, asking questions from time to time with his lips, and hearing replies with his ears; but he thought of nothing so little as of the subject in hand. If once or twice the amused smile again played about his mouth, he was careful that its criticism of her uncle should be made only when her back was turned. He owed that smile, however, to his own keen business intelligence. . . .

Presently they left the looms and passed to the fulling-shed that ran at right-angles to the river.

"Then they brought the cloth here"; she continued her explanation, pausing before the first of a row of stable-like stalls through which ran a long trough, with shafting above for the setting in motion of certain heavy stampers of timber. "These are the stocks. The trough was filled with water, and then the new cloth was pounded about.—That's the wheel, out at the end there.—They've rather an expressive proverb about the stocks hereabouts, by the way. '*A nail in the stocks*' means a person, or a thing either, I suppose, that makes mischief—for if a nail got in here it ruined the cloth, you see——"

“Most expressive, most expressive!” Emney murmured again, once more allowing his eyes to stray over her. He was becoming more taken with each moment that passed.

In this part of the building her appearance was, indeed, positively radiant. The whole of the end of the shed stood open to the river, and the sunlight, mirrored upwards from the running water, made a ceaseless running and rippling of light among the grimy rafters overhead. Tall weeds choked the mechanism of the partly seen water-wheel, and in its motionless boxes grew grass and groundsel and dandelions. Birds sang, the river made a pleasant sound, and the greenish light transmitted through leaves ivoried Berice's throat and gave a cooler cast to her browned cheeks. Emney was sensitively alive to all this. His nature had that turning towards beauty that follows no known law of birth or breeding or education; an urging towards actual possession was involved in this sense; and his conviction of Berice's desirableness was a thing that, unless he crushed it, which he saw no reason to do, might, he foresaw, very quickly run away with him. He had dreamed long of the day when he should allow himself to be run away with thus. . . . She was a wellnigh perfect piece. As he looked at her it was as if the same impulse that had led him into the studios of artists and the houses of dealers worked in him again here in this ridiculous mill. . . .

As he listened and questioned mechanically, not ceasing to admire her, a small accident stood his friend. Again, as before, she let fall an inadvertency. Some remark about a 'jacket' escaped her.

“A 'jacket'? What's that?” he asked.

She was inwardly a little vexed.

“A scheme—any rather harebrained project,” she answered, not insupportably anxious to admit him to the intimacies of the family language. “It's merely a rather silly expression.”

“But why 'jacket'?”

For a fraction of time she hesitated; then she remembered that the more quickly she explained the less significance the

trifle was likely to have. Briefly she enlightened him. He smiled and nodded.

“What friends you and your uncle seem to be!” he remarked. “I’ve heard you call him ‘Ev.’ You’ve no idea how jolly that sounds to me; there’s been so little of anything of the sort in my life, you see. . . . I wonder if I could ask you something quite personal without offending you?”

Berice asked what that was.

“Please take it quite harmlessly. It’s about you and your uncle. What are you going to do?”

She considered for a moment, and then saw no reason why she should not answer him in detail. She did so, a little punctiliously.

“My uncle will probably go to London—for a time at any rate. There are several people I myself could go to, but I don’t feel like singing for my supper just now. So I shall probably go and stay for a little while with some people called Tracy, in Lincolnshire, and then go on to the Howitts, neighbours of theirs. After that I shall probably join my uncle.”

He was on the point of expressing a hope that all this was not to begin immediately, but thought better of it. Perhaps he checked himself the more readily that he saw that she was on the point of speaking again, and was apparently a little embarrassed at something. The colour in her cheeks had even deepened slightly. Then suddenly she looked him frankly in the face and proceeded to make another impulsive mistake.

“Since we’re asking questions, there’s something *I* should very much like to ask *you*,” she said. “My uncle tells me you’re thinking of making the new ponds. I do hope you won’t.”

He was standing with one foot raised on the trough timbers. A shred of cobweb on his neat hopsack trousers engaged his attention for a moment. When he had removed it he straightened himself.

“Oh,” he asked slowly, giving her her look back again. “Why?”

It was she who dropped her eyes first, suddenly confused and enlightened. This time there was no doubt about the

deepened colour of her cheeks; it spread to the greenish-brown ivory of her neck. She knew from that look of his that he would make the ponds. He would make twenty ponds if by doing so he could delay the departure of his two guests. He had summed Everard up with fine accuracy, and, twice helped by accidents, had now outwitted herself—had put upon her a responsibility she could not assume—that of naming to him his own thoughts. And knowing this, she must appear not to know it. Again she was mortified by a trifle.

“It’s only another jacket,” she murmured with downcast eyes.

But he would not allow this. He smiled reassuringly. His manner mitigated his own advantage.

“Oh, pardon me,” he protested, “a really serviceable idea this time, if I may say so! You must allow me to be the judge. . . . Now all this,” with a wave of his hand he indicated the dusty apparatus of the fulling-mill, “I’m bound to admit that this *does* distinctly resemble what you call a jacket. Out of date. It belongs to the Middle Ages, of course. I really don’t think Mr. Beckwith was wisely advised when he undertook this; as a proposition in modern business I wouldn’t take it as security for fifty pounds. But the ponds are a different thing altogether. *That* would be money very well laid down, and if I were your uncle I should make new kitchen premises also. Has he ever lost a tenant on account of the kitchens, by the way?”

It was a guess, but it served; Everard had, in fact, lost two chances before coming to terms with Emney himself. “*Voilà!*” the banker’s gently bland shrug seemed to say. . . . “It doesn’t matter much in my case, because I’m a bachelor,” he added, looking straight at her; “but I give you my word, Miss Beckwith, that I shouldn’t entertain this other idea for a moment except for my own personal convenience. . . .”

If there was an assumption in every word he uttered, he spoke none the less with pellucid reason. Any unhappy client of Emney’s, hold of the wrong end of the business stick, could have told Berice that in such matters he did not prevaricate; and Berice saw the corner into which she had put

herself and from which apparently he was not willing she should escape. She wanted to escape, in more senses than one. She wanted now to be out in the air, away from him, that she might examine her new discovery in all its bearings. She knew, to put it bluntly, that he was deliberately ingratiating himself.

Her face was averted from him, and without looking at him she moved towards the wide opening that gave on the river. She stood at the end of the shed in a sector of sunlight, looking down on the grass-grown water-wheel.

“This is the wheel, if you care to see it,” she said presently, “and that’s all. As you say, the whole thing’s rather a Folly. It isn’t my uncle’s line, that’s all.”

“No,” he replied quite simply, and this time without a smile. Then, as a figure passed along the wooded bank on the other side of the stream, he asked, “Who’s that?”

“Where?” she said, turning. . . . “Oh, that’s Bunny—Bunny Hartopp, Sir John Hartopp’s son, your neighbour.”

Bunny, trudging with head down along the opposite bank, did not glance across at the mill; he took a little slope, and disappeared round the end of the bridge. And as Emney watched him pass, an unreasonable but undeniable twinge took him that she should have lived her life and formed her friendships before ever he had known her.

V

BUNNY had seen neither Berice nor Emney standing within the opening above the water-wheel ; but he saw them both that same afternoon when he walked with his father over the moor to shake hands with the new tenant of Skirethorns. It was on the terrace that he found himself striking matches in Berice's company, while Sir John Hartopp and Emney and Everard Beckwith stood talking outside the open drawing-room window a few yards away.

Berice could not have told why in her secret heart she was a little afraid of Bunny ; probably, indeed, she would not have admitted the fact. Nevertheless, she realized the many differences between them. Compared with her own slight, off-handed, and facile apprehension of things, Bunny's methods of thought were slow and restricted. She considered him to be entirely devoid of the capacity for making allowances. Things were right to him, or they were wrong ; black, or white ; and it did not seem to Berice that things in this world were frequently so simply and unqualifiably one thing or the other. Knowing nothing of Bunny the painter, it would have seemed an unreal thing to her that Bunny reserved elasticities and extenuations for his seldom-exhibited canvases ; and she would probably have told him roundly that she would have preferred harsher painting and less moroseness in ordinary intercourse. And yet she feared him. He was hard, and could hurt without knowing that he hurt. And Berice would make almost any avoidance in order to escape pain.

As she eyed him a little askance as he stood by her side on the terrace, she remarked on the number of matches he struck. He received the remark without looking at her ; but presently he seemed to reconsider something, and made

a little motion of his head that she should come a little further from the group by the drawing-room window. His hand was fumbling in the pocket of his jacket.

"What is it?" she asked, approaching him.

Bunny mumbled. "I know you used to wear one—a few years ago—I've seen one in the collar of your sweater—it isn't mine—I never had one—if it isn't yours it's Lionel's——"

He put a crumpled piece of paper into her hand. She opened it. It contained a plain gold safety-pin.

Her eyes seemed fastened to it as it lay in her hand. A "Tha—thanks," came dryly from her lips. "Thanks," she said again, with more resolution; and then, as if even then it was not quite well enough, "Thanks," she said for the third time.

"You used to have one. So did Lionel—fastened his stock with one. I don't know whose it is—it isn't mine," Bunny mumbled again, looking away down the garden to where a couple of gardeners were at work. "Have it if you like, anyway," he added.

The pin *had* been her own at one time, but for the life of her she could not remember whether she had ever given it away. Presently she shot a stealthy look at Bunny. He seemed unconscious of the glance.

"You can give it me back if you don't want it," he said, still watching the gardeners.

"Where——?" she began: but quickly she changed her mind. Perhaps it would be better *not* to ask Bunny where he had found it. Quietly, and as if of its own volition, her hand went with hardly a tremor to the short tie at her bosom. It fastened the pin there, and gave the tie a tug.

"Thank you. I'll keep it," she said.

A silence fell upon them, and from further along the terrace came Emney's voice—"You can depend upon it, Beckwith, that a man who's getting more than ten per cent for his money is paying it himself. . . ."

By and by Bunny spoke again, breaking with a great effort the obstinate silence.

"You know Mrs. Finch-Ommaney's putting up a memorial to him?" he said abruptly.

Berice moistened her lips. "To Lionel? Where?"

"In the church. I was at Undershaws a couple of days ago, and we were talking about it. I'm finding a sculptor for her. Rotten job to do it will be—all from photographs and descriptions, of course. . . ."

"Oh?"

"Yes."

Again Emney's voice was heard (Everard had disappeared into the house). "Well, it may be a hobby, and may even cost money—though as I was saying to Miss Beckwith this morning, I regard it as quite a good investment too: but even if it is one, our hobbies needn't be reduced to a paying basis. . . ."

Again Bunny broke silence.

"When are you going away?" he asked.

"As soon as Ev's ready. The sooner the better, I think," said Berice shortly.

"Yes," said Bunny again. . . .

The monosyllable was capable of a torturing number of shades of interpretation; but Berice's nature was not so transparent that it did not include a measure of craft. She ached to know what Bunny meant, and knew that people's meanings are likely to come out if they talk long enough. Her hand went to the pin at her breast for a moment, and then she asked in a low voice:

"Why 'Yes,' Bunny—like that?"

"It's only what you said yourself," was Bunny's reply.

"But why 'Yes' in that tone, Bunny?" She sought to cajole and to reproach both at once.

Bunny fidgeted.

"Well—I mean—if I were in your place I should want to be one thing or the other—here or away."

Her voice broke a little. "Anybody'd think you were anxious to get rid of me, Bunny."

Bunny met the remark with a stare. "I? . . . Of course, I shall be sorry; but that apart, what difference does it make to *me*? I don't want to be rude, but dash it all, Berice, don't let's quarrel."

"I'm not quarrelling—it's you who aren't as you used to

be. You go away without saying good-bye to me, and have hardly a word for me when you come back again. . . . Why can't we be friends? Why aren't we friends?"

"I didn't know we weren't," said Bunny doggedly.

"I don't think you realize how different you are. You used——"

With quick exasperation Bunny struck another match, but by the time he had thrown it away again he had mastered himself, and spoke more gently.

"Better drop it, Berice. It isn't as if I didn't know you, you know. I do know you. You want pleasant things said to you all the time, and if I don't say 'em I'm rude. And if I *do* say 'em, what's the good? I can't help it—let's drop it. I'll tell you one thing, though, if you like: you've had too much that you wanted, and you're spoiled. That's my opinion."

And with his next match Bunny really managed to light his pipe.

"What have I——" Berice began; but at that moment Everard stepped out of the drawing-room window again and called Bunny.

"Hallo?" Bunny called back.

"Just a minute. You remember when we staked all out for the ponds? Was it a four or a five-foot fall we allowed for?"

"Five," said Bunny, as he turned his back on Berice and strolled towards the group. "Five, and a three-foot basin."

"Five, was it? H'm! . . . Well, the best thing we can do is to go up and have a look at the place. There's just time before lunch. Coming with us, Bunny?"

"I'll follow you up presently. If I may, I should like to go inside and write a letter, Mr. Emney."

"By all means; you know where, I expect. Will you join us, Miss Beckwith?"

"If you'll excuse me—I'm just going up to my room," said Berice. . . .

If Emney, glancing round as the party moved away, supposed that these two were remaining behind to be in each other's company, he was wrong. Berice went straight up to

her room, and Bunny into the drawing-room, where he sat down to write his letter. It began :

“ DEAR NEILL,

“ I’ve made that all right, and you’d better come down at once. I suppose you’ll use clay, not wax, but if you want wax you’d better bring your own. You can order clay and plaster from here. Mrs. Finch-Ommaney has the profile photograph, but it has a Service cap on that rather hides the shape of the head, so you’ll have to manage as best you can. . . . ”

At this point Bunny’s letter changed its character. After a prolonged pondering, presumably on what was to follow, Bunny made a letter ‘ B ’ in the middle of the blank portion of the page. Then he wrote a name, and then wrote it again. The rest of the letter ran :

“ Berice—Berice—B—B. B.—Bice—Berice—— ”

Then suddenly he pushed his chair back and rose. He crumpled up the sheet of paper and thrust it into his pocket. He then crammed his cap savagely on his head and went out, and, taking the direction that would most quickly place distance between himself and the party that had ascended to the site of the new ponds, he strode away without looking behind him.

From the window of her room Berice watched him depart. Now that she was alone her face had a scared look. Twice, when little fluttering fits had taken her, she had put herself before the glass and had striven to look at her own face as if it belonged to somebody else ; but each time her eyes had wandered to the gold pin at her breast and had refused to leave it. She wondered how she had appeared to Bunny in a certain moment hardly half an hour ago. . . .

But, she remembered, she had not appeared either one way or another to Bunny ; Bunny had not looked at her ; and the swift thought, *Why* had he not done so ? came to her. It was not very extraordinary that he had not ; it would not have been very extraordinary if he had ; still—*why* had he not ? And if he *had* looked, what would he have seen ? . . .

She rose for the purpose of making another lightning-swift cast into the glass, but again found herself gazing only at the slender slip of gold. . . .

Wistaria embowered her bedroom window and covered the little balcony outside. Bunny had gone, but beyond the steel-blue flowers, nearly a mile away, a thread of the Cotter gleamed, and through a gap in the trees a score or two yards of the white ribbon of road showed. Suddenly she remembered that if Bunny went down the Dale he would pass along that bit of road. . . .

She sprang to the window, as if she hoped the sight of his heavy shoulders might tell her something.

He appeared, a small speck moving quickly, and disappeared again. Berice's brow gathered into a twist of fear. She sank into a chair. Not even to herself dared she formulate that fear. . . .

Then she remembered Bunny's inflexible code. In time past she had twitted him about it, had laughingly congratulated him on the simplification of Life it made when black could be seen to be so immitigably black and white so clear of soilure. He had usually grunted in reply that things ought to be called by their proper names. Once she had assured him that, holding views so unassailably normal, he would be an Academician yet; and he had fumed, and demanded to be shown what was the connection. It had never been difficult to bewilder Bunny with what he contemptuously called 'tongue-work,' and probably the only result of Berice's amusement had been that Bunny now credited her with more understanding than she had ever possessed. There is a penalty to be paid for being sometimes accidentally right; the gambler seldom retires as long as the luck is with him. That was why Berice liked to go to the dear, easy-going Tracys. All her casts of wit were double-sixes there. But with Bunny. . . .

"You've had too much that you wanted; you're spoiled" . . . it might mean everything, or nothing. And he had given her the pin—the pin. She was in a horrible ignorance; she could hardly endure to sit at her window and think of it. One moment she felt that she must rush out at once, meet

him on his return, and ask him in plain words what he had meant ; the next she felt that she could not face him. Again she wondered whether she had betrayed herself in accepting the pin—and whether she would not have done better to refuse it. After all, she could not remember whether it had actually been her own or Lionel's ; probably they had both worn it. . . . Then, the next moment, she welled with reassurances. She told herself that she was stuffing her imagination with silly fears. As for the taciturnity of Bunny's manner, well, without that Bunny would not be Bunny. He must be taken as he was. If it had been anybody else she would have quailed ; but Bunny . . . no, it had meant nothing. Her quick fears had been sparks of her light fancy, and were already dead in the striking-out. She would wear the pin. . . .

The next moment again it seemed to burn her through her clothing. . . .

And then again she gave a little stifled laugh. Bunny ? As if anybody took any notice of Bunny ! . . .

But the net result of half an hour of this was wholly to confirm her in her half-formed intention of the morning, when she had dropped her eyes before that unmistakable look in Emney's. She would go away. Bunny, too, had said it would be the best. Emily Tracy would be glad to have her for a month or so. She would write at once, acquainting her of her willingness to be invited. Yes, she would write to Emily without a minute's delay.

Already calmer, she went downstairs, and, at the table not long before vacated by Bunny, wrote her letter. Then, putting on her hat and looking at herself in another mirror, she went out, leaving her letter on the hall table as she passed.

Five minutes later she stood with the three men at the rush-covered patch of hillside above the plantation. Even as she arrived Emney was saying, " Then, Beckwith, with your permission I'll put it in hand at once. . . ."

Everard, who was winding up a ball of string, gave a short, pleased laugh.

" You have my permission all right," he laughed. " I've

no objection to my property being improved—provided always there's some adjustment of our contract. What you do for your private convenience is your own affair to a large extent, but I benefit too, and I give no consent unless I meet you on the cost. Let me see, let me see——”

There was a quiet twinkle in Emney's eyes.

“Very well; we hardly need go into that now. . . . But there's just one other point. It's your property I'm going to cut about, and I don't care to take the responsibility of doing it quite on my own. Of course, we could have a specification drawn up, and I should be bound by that, but—is that necessary? What I mean is, are you so pressingly engaged elsewhere that you couldn't stay and see the thing at least well started?”

Berice heard it, and her heart marked the speech with a private “I told you so!” She knew that Emney did not care one of the rushes at his feet about the ponds, and she felt the balm of a little satisfaction that already he was forestalled. In a couple of days she would have heard from Emily Tracy, and could be off that same afternoon. . . .

“Oh, no, no—that's far too kind of you,” Everard was saying irresolutely.

“You can't even see the thing started?”

“I could hardly do more than that, at the very most. . . . You hear what Mr. Emney's so good as to propose, Berice?”

“Yes,” said Berice with composure. “It's most kind of Mr. Emney. Perhaps it would be the best thing for you, and then I could do as Emily Tracy suggests.”

“Emily? . . . You've heard from Emily, have you? . . . What's that she suggests?” Everard asked.

Berice anticipated Emily's wish by a post or two. “She wants me to go and stay with them. I've already broken the news to Mr. Emney. I shall go on Thursday.”

Everard put the ball of string in his pocket.

“Oh, well, that simplifies things,” he said cheerfully. “I myself shouldn't have been off by Thursday in any case. Thanks, Emney. So we may as well all go on to Hartopp's to dinner, as he suggests.”

Nobody would have guessed from Emney's tone that he had just been baulked in anything. He murmured :

"Delighted. . . . Here's your son back too, I think, Sir John——"

There was the sound of somebody coming up through the plantation ; but it was not Bunny. A man from Undershaws came up to Berice with a letter. She opened it and read it. It ran :

"DEAR BERICE,

"Mrs. Finch-Ommaney would like you to come over, to-day if you can. She particularly wants it, and Dr. Vayle thinks it would be as well if you could. Please reply.

"P.S—I'd bring a few things.

"Yours,
"CELIA."

Slowly Berice folded the letter and put it into her pocket. She turned to the messenger.

"If you'll come down to the house I'll give you an answer," she said. Then, turning to her uncle, she added, "I shan't be able to go to Emily's after all. Mrs. Finch-Ommaney wants me to go over there."

Passing into the house a few minutes later to write her reply, she took from the hall table the uncollected letter she had written to Emily Tracy, tore it in two, and put the halves into her pocket. She wrote her note to Celia Chester, and then went slowly upstairs to put a few necessaries together.

VI

IT was with a feeling that she was being urged forward against her will that Berice, alighting from the trap beyond Cotterdale village and sending Joe Warry forward with her bag, began that same afternoon to walk to Under-shaws. To go to that house was the last thing she would have chosen, had she had any choice. It had never been a merry house—it did not look merry. It lay low by the river, and was darkened by almost the only elms in the neighbourhood, the innumerable rooks nesting in which filled the air with their cawing. Even its luxurious lily-garden, the finest for miles round, had few attractions for Berice; Mrs. Finch-Ommaney had made it, and it was rather like its maker—a little scenically displayed, a little showy and artificial, a little existing for its own sake at some cost not easily to be defined. And it was precisely the opposite of all these things of which Berice stood for the moment in need.

And besides Mrs. Finch-Ommaney herself, there was Celia Chester, the pretty, gently stupid girl, devoted, with not too much vitality about her, faithful to the letter of things, and now naturally bowed down by grief. . . .

Well, there was nothing for it but to go through with it. . . .

Berice saw the long, low front of the yellow-washed house, with its yard-wide eaves and its room-darkening veranda, before she was observed by the two women who sat outside. One of them, however, did not sit—Mrs. Finch-Ommaney appeared to be sleeping in a long chair. By the side of her black, the black in which Celia was dressed was somehow hardly seen—so enriched a blackness did it seem to take on from the genius of her wearing of it: the shawl that covered her was black, and a piece of black lace was drawn down in a point over her high-piled white hair. Her brows seemed

to make blacker arches and her lashes a darker fringing than usual, and her small mouth, with its voluptuously downy corners, was slightly open.

"Don't wake her," Berice whispered as Celia rose. "I came at once, you see."

Celia seemed pale, worn out, and listless. Her eyes a little avoided Berice's.

"Thank you. I thought you would. She seems to want you," she replied.

"You look tired out too, dear; I shall have to look after the pair of you, I see. Tell me what I can do."

"I don't know, except just be here," Celia sighed. "That's what she seems to want. . . . I think she's awake. Here's Berice, mother dear."

Berice knelt by the chair and took one of Mrs. Finch-Ommaney's plump hands in her own.

"I've come, dear Mrs. Finch-Ommaney," she said.

Mrs. Finch-Ommaney struggled with her drowsiness.

"I've been dreaming," she murmured. "I shall be quite awake in a minute. . . . How sweet of you to come, darling."

"You didn't think I shouldn't?" Berice murmured reproachfully.

"No, dear—no, dear—but I was selfish to ask it. I know we oughtn't to allow one sorrow to make us selfish, but I can't help it. Poor Cecil—and then my Lal . . . my own boy. . . . But you must bear with me, dear; you will, won't you? Do you think we might have tea, Célie? Berice would like tea. I won't have any, thank you—and please tuck my feet in—no, don't trouble—it doesn't matter—I'm only giving trouble."

Tea was brought on a small table, and Celia busied herself among the cups. She moved so languidly that Berice, jumping up, took the teapot from her. Celia relinquished it without protest, and bent over Mrs. Finch-Ommaney.

"Your cushions are quite comfortable, mother dear?" she asked.

"Quite, thank you, Célie. Thank you, thank you."

"And are your feet warm?"

"Perfectly, my child. What a devoted attendant you are!"

"Then do you mind if I leave you with Berice for a little while? I've rather a headache." She passed her hand wearily over her brow.

"Drink this," said Berice, passing her a cup of tea.

But Celia said that it would do her more good to lie down, made fresh arrangements of Mrs. Finch-Ommaney's cushions, kissed her, and passed into the house. Mrs. Finch-Ommaney's eyes followed her: then she turned to Berice.

"Now we can talk," she said, immediately adding, "of course, I don't mean we couldn't have talked with poor Célie here. . . . Oh, dear, I'm not properly awake yet!—I was dreaming when you came. . . . I am very happy when I dream nowadays. . . . You can stay for a little while with a fretful old woman, can't you, Berice? And if you don't mind picking that book up——"

"I've brought a small bag, and I can send for other things if necessary," said Berice, picking up the copy of the *Imitation* that had slipped to the ground.

"Thank you, dear. If Lal could see you now, taking care of his poor old mother . . . but things had to be as they were, I suppose: it's no good thinking how different they might have been. . . . Where's Sammie? Having his snooze, I expect. Sammie's very dear to me now, poor old doggie.—Do you remember the day when Bunny hit him with a stone, Berice? Oh, quite by accident, I know! You were there, I think—you and Emily Tracy and Bunny and my boy—you'd all gone for a walk, if I remember. And Lal carried him all the way home, and went into the village in the rain for some ointment without even changing his wet things—poor old doggie!"

"Yes," said Berice. She remembered it. At the time she had thought that more consideration was shown to the spaniel than to Bunny.

"So like him!" Mrs. Finch-Ommaney murmured. . . . "But I am given strength to bear it. I sleep a good deal, and I always dream. . . . Berice, dear," she paused, fondled Berice's hands for a moment, and then continued in a lower tone, "you must forget what I said the other day. I oughtn't to have said it. I ought not to have shown so little resignation. . . ."

Nor ought she to have alluded to it now, Berice could not forbear thinking ; but she only murmured " Hush ! "

" No, I oughtn't to have said it. Forget it, dear. I'll try, I'll really try to forget it too. . . . We owe something to poor Célie after all. . . . And sometimes I read the *Imitation*. Oh, that comforting book ! I wonder if you would read to me a little ! "

" Won't you take a walk on my arm instead ? " said Berice, already looking on the wondrous book with no great favour.

But Mrs. Finch-Ommaney raised her dark half-moon brows, as if Berice had proposed something a little shocking.

" Oh, my darling, I couldn't ! " she protested, with a decisiveness that was not the less for being mildly uttered. . . .

Not for the first time, a thought had crossed Berice's mind so distasteful that she reddened to entertain it. She wondered whether Mrs. Finch-Ommaney was making a luxury of her grief. But quickly she strove to put the suggestion away as hardly decent. Human nature will not bear dissection to that extent. The face-value of things must be accepted. And unless Berice's immediate future was to become an hourly torture she already saw clearly that she would have to shut her eyes to very much, and to harden herself against that which came in at her ears. . . .

" But I shall make you walk, you know, if I'm to stay here," she said, with the best attempt at gaiety she could compass. " I don't mind reading a little to you now, however."

She took the book.

She read from the *Imitation* for half an hour. Celia did not reappear. Then Berice closed the book, helped Mrs. Finch-Ommaney to rise, and supported her as far as the door of her room. She then sought her own apartment.

She lingered long over the unpacking of her few things, and when she had finished lay down on her bed until the gong should sound. . . . Its reverberation roused her at half-past six ; she had no dressing to do ; and she descended to dinner in an artificially braced mood which it had cost her no little effort to attain.

The three women dined alone. After dinner Berice busied

herself with needlework, while Celia wrote letters and Mrs. Finch-Ommaney dozed over the *Imitation*. At half-past nine Mrs. Finch-Ommaney asked for her candles.

"I shall go too," said Celia dejectedly. She had not spoken a dozen words all the evening, and Berice looked on it as cruelty that she should be kept in that house. She lacked the robust spirits that could have borne up against it.

Five minutes later Berice found herself alone. She sat down before a dying log fire.

The Undershaws rooms were large and full of uncertain glooms, in which suddenly-seen liquid mirrors made deceptive distances; there seemed to be immense spaces between the candles that burned in their still haloes at one end of the room and those at the other end. The reflections of the flames in the uncurtained window-panes seemed illimitably remote. Outside the elms sighed, and the log on the hearth made a sound of settling from time to time. Berice got up out of her chair, curled herself on the thick rug, and gazed absently at the reticulated pattern of brightness on the under side of the log.

Little more than a week had passed since, stretched on a rock at the margin of a mountain stream, there had come to her that strange, illusory sense of things closed, folded up, scored off and sanctified in her memory, and already its support was failing her. The world was showing itself very little heedful of her emotional crises. The impact of other lives on her own had not ceased merely because she had decreed certain things to be at an end. Her uncle's amiable pond-jacket—Emney's attempt to turn it to his own uses—her own frustrated effort at frustration—Mrs. Finch-Ommaney's unexpected summons—and added to all these the disturbing incident of the pin—a few days had brought it all to pass, and here she was at Undershaws, with old ghosts and memories crowding thick upon her. There was a fascination about it all—there almost seemed a purpose. She looked round the room; she knew it so well: it had changed so little since she herself, as a little girl, had stayed at Undershaws weeks together. Cecil Finch-Ommaney, Lionel's father, had been alive then, and she remembered him as

he had sat in his chair there, with Lionel, a little boy of six, dark eyed and arched browed, in a lace collar, sitting on the footstool at his father's feet, spelling slowly out of his book and easily distracted from the page. . . . Then he had become a cadet. . . . Then . . . But the heads of markhor and gazelle, the little glass-topped table-cases of antiques and valuables, the rugs, the chairs, the low-raftered ceiling, all had voices that whispered rather horribly to her spirit. Berice would hardly have been surprised had the door opened and had one of the dead ones entered. . . .

The door did open ; but it was Celia Chester who entered. She was night-gowned, with her hair in two straight and rather short plaits and her feet pushed into slippers of knitted blue wool ; and the wrap she had cast hastily about her shoulders had slipped half-way down to her waist. She stood with her hand on the knob, for the moment not seeing Berice stretched on the rug ; then she saw her, closed the door softly, and moved to the hearth. She put one knitted slipper on the kerb, and in the firelight her form was seen faintly within her slight attire.

“ I thought you went to bed too early,” Berice remarked.

As Celia put her hand to the edge of the mantelpiece her sleeve fell, showing her thin and rubile arm to the armpit.

“ Yes. I couldn't sleep, so I've come down to sit with you,” she said.

Berice had her own opinion of Celia's capacity for hiding her emotion ; it was that it was small : and she was not surprised when presently Celia gave a little gulp and allowed her head to fall to the arm that was stretched out to the mantelpiece. The spiritless way in which she wept had the special touchingness of hopeless, unresisting grief.

“ Oh, Berice !—It isn't as if I hadn't done my best,” she sobbed quietly. “ I have—I've taken everything on myself—I scarcely leave her side—I do everything, and—and——”

“ Hush !” Berice gently besought her, putting her hand for a moment on the wool-clad foot.

“ —and it isn't enough—I don't seem to be able to help—I don't mean that she complains—but I don't seem to be any good——”

“ Oh, hush ! ” Berice sat up on the rug and passed one arm about the lightly clad ankles. “ She’s ill, and overcome with sorrow—at any rate—— ” But Berice checked her qualification.

“ I’ve tried—I’ve done my best—but it’s you, you she wants ! ” Celia broke wretchedly out.

Berice was silent. She was wondering whether Mrs. Finch-Ommaney had spoken one of her asides in Celia’s presence. She did not know that involuntarily she embraced the girl’s ankles more closely.

“ And the hard thing is that it’s—oh, it’s *my* place to help ! ” Celia moaned. “ We were to have been married—we were to have been married in very little more than a year—his next leave—he was getting a whole year, and then I was to have gone out with him—and oh, it’s my place ! In the very last letter I ever had from him he said . . . but I can’t tell you . . . you don’t know what beautiful letters he wrote . . . and I could forget half my own trouble if I could only comfort her . . . but everything I can do isn’t enough.”

“ Poor child ! ” Berice spoke the words hardly audibly, and shivered a little as she did so. Then, conquering the slight faintness that had come over her, she added with a helpless gesture, “ It *is* your place, dear, but—but you know *I* didn’t want to take it from you ! Oh, I didn’t—you don’t *know* how little I wanted—— ! ”

She closed her eyes hard, as if she would shut out the sight of Undershaws and all it contained.

“ You didn’t want to come ? You really didn’t ? ” Celia cried, making a little impulsive movement to be gathered more closely into Berice’s arms.

“ I didn’t.”

“ Really ? You’re not saying it just out of kindness ? ”

“ I’d rather be anywhere else than here just now,” said Berice, with a miserable fervour that was lost on Celia.

Celia sank softly to her knees in front of Berice.

“ Oh, Berice ! ” she said with soft contrition, “ I didn’t, I really didn’t know ! I was afraid that—that—oh, I *knew* that his mother really wanted you—she always wanted you,

I *know* she did—and I was afraid *you* wanted *him*, and that you'd have taken him if he'd ever asked you! Oh, that's what I thought! . . . And I was jealous, darling, when I hadn't got him any longer, and knew what his mother was thinking! . . . Tell me I needn't have been jealous, Berice—yes, I know it's silly of me to ask it, but tell me, dear——”

Berice's cheek was against the younger girl's. Her face could not be seen. And then again Celia seemed to have a momentary doubt, for she put Berice a little away, while a brief anxiety showed on her brow.

“And I needn't have been jealous on his account either?” she said, with a short catch of her breath.

It was to avoid the trusting look in her eyes that Berice drew Celia to her again.

“I could never, never have married him, Celia—is that what you mean?”

For a moment longer Celia seemed to mistrust.

“You're not saying it because I ask you?”

“No. I could never, never, never have married him—what more can I say?”

“On your honour?”

“On my honour——” she could at least say that. . . .

Celia's sob of thankfulness was almost a laugh.

“How mean and wicked I've been! Oh, forgive me, Berice! And I sent you such a horrid curt note to-day too! You see,” she chattered almost gaily, “it's been so plain, what his mother wanted—don't shake your head; I *know* she did!—that I thought—I thought—and he *ought* to have had you by rights—I could never understand it—but, of course, I was glad he didn't! . . . I even said to him once, ‘Why don't you marry Berice?’ And he said . . . but I can't tell you what he said, dear; that's mine only, it was so sweet; I only think of it sometimes . . . and I was jealous even though I knew he'd never asked you! . . . And I sent you that horrid, horrid note! What a beast you must have thought me!—But I'm so much happier now! . . . How your heart beats, dear! That's my wrong thoughts, I know. . . . I'm so ashamed. . . .”

She babbled on, saying the same things half a dozen times over, gradually finding a peace in her innocent self-reproaches. Presently she was quite calm again.

“ Oh, by the by,” she said suddenly, “ I suppose you know Bunny’s friend’s coming to-morrow ? ”

Berice was dully watching the dying log. She managed to get out a “ Who ? ”

“ Mr. Neill. Who’s to do the memorial. Bunny was writing, but he wired instead, and Mr. Neill will be here to-morrow.”

Ah, yes: Berice remembered she had heard something about a memorial. . . .

“ He’ll stay with Bunny, and work in that cottage—you know it, of course. Mother wants the memorial done at once, so that it can be put up in the church on his birthday, in September.”

Yes: Berice remembered his birthday was in September. . .

“ The seventeenth. Bunny says Mr. Neill can just manage to do it in time.—And oh, Berice, there’s one other little thing. If you hadn’t told what you have I could never, never have done it—I was so horribly, horribly jealous and suspicious—but I’m perfectly, perfectly happy now! You *would* like something of Lal’s to keep, wouldn’t you? For both our sakes, his and mine? I’ll give you—I’ll give you—but never mind: I’ll find something for you to remember him by. I couldn’t before, you know. . . .”

For a moment Berice looked as if she was about to speak, but nothing came but a gulp. Celia continued.

“ I’ll find you something to-morrow. And I can go on being useful now. I shan’t mind so much when she’s a little troublesome. Oh, how I hated you to come, and how glad I am now that you did! You do forgive me, don’t you? . . . And oh, my dear, you’re as cold as ice! Do come up into my bed——”

Berice spoke as if she dragged up words by the roots.

“ I should like to sit a little while yet—I should only disturb you coming up later—I’ll stay a little——”

“ All alone down here? And you so cold? Well, if you must. Just one minute——”

Celia clasped her. For a minute they remained enlaced ; then Celia kissed her many times, and rose.

“ Good night, dear,” she said. “ Don’t stay long——”

From the door she gave Berice another gentle look ; and then the door closed behind her. It was not until two hours later that Berice, shivering and weary, ridden with present fears and apprehensive of she knew not what gathering menaces yet to come, left the extinct fire and followed her.

VII

IT was on the following afternoon that Berice, unpacking in her bedroom the larger box of clothes that she had sent for and Joe Warry had already brought, heard below her open window the voice of Bunny Hartopp introducing his friend Neill. Then a stranger's voice, deep and pleasant and arrestingly gentle, floated up over the veranda.

"Yes, Hartopp explained to me quite fully. . . . Indeed, I hope you won't speak of trouble; I owed Hartopp a visit in any case . . . the trouble will be of quite a different kind if I'd seen your son as much as once even . . . do the best we can. . . ."

The voice ceased, and the burden was taken up by Mrs. Finch-Ommaney's more familiar tones—"So very good . . . short notice . . . September . . . house of grief. . . ."

Berice finished her unpacking, and went downstairs in time to meet the little group coming in for tea.

Bunny's friend was tall, slight almost to emaciation, and stooped a little. He was perhaps forty-two, with temples already silvered, and the look of a lean and noble hound. Berice did not remember who introduced him to her, nor even whether he was introduced; she was only conscious that the gravity and gentleness of the eyes that met her own for a moment over the cup of tea Mr. Neill handed to her were among the most profoundly consoling and trustworthy things she had known. The next moment he had passed to Mrs. Finch-Ommaney's side. Celia also had left the room, to return presently with a small packet which she handed to the sculptor. Bunny, with his buttoned knees a yard apart, was gazing down between them at the pattern of the carpet and his cup of tea on the floor. He had all the appearance

that the number of his accustomed griefs had been recently added to.

“I’m afraid I must make it quite clear at the beginning that I can’t answer for the success of it,” Neill’s velvety voice was saying to Mrs. Finch-Ommaney.

“You cannot fail,” Mrs. Finch-Ommaney replied, with placid confidence. “He had such a sweet disposition.”

“And one other thing I’m sure I need only mention,” Neill continued, inclining his head, “I shall do my utmost, of course; but if I find the thing beyond me I must be allowed to withdraw. There are peculiar difficulties, you see. Success depends as much on others as on me. Unfortunately, too, you mention September as the date by which you would like the thing finished——”

The pause, and the slight expressive gesture of his long hand, indicated that had it been possible it would have been better to delay the memorial, with all the discussion of it that would be involved, until hearts quivered less readily at a word. Bunny saw the gesture, dropped his eyes again, and muttered awkwardly to the carpet, “Oh, that’s all right, Murragh; I can tell you whole lots of things.” Berice caught Neill’s slight smile, that he should have to rely on the broken reed of Bunny’s communicativeness, and the next moment the smile vanished as Mrs. Finch-Ommaney spoke again.

“You can speak quite freely about him to anyone here, Mr. Neill; my boy’s was such a beautiful, beautiful character—I cannot yet realize that he is gone—gone. There’s nothing you cannot ask us. Miss Chester has the photographs, and every other help shall be given you. Ah, it’s so clear, so clear to me, that with your gift I almost feel as if——”

Her slight gesture expressed her conviction that with Neill’s gift she could make the memorial herself. Neill was gravely attentive, and the talk continued—Lionel, Lionel,—his sweet babyhood, his lovely youth, the perfection of his manhood. . . . Berice, finding that her presence was not needed, rose and walked out into the garden. It was there, ten minutes later, that she heard her name spoken, and, turning, saw Mr. Neill, who had apparently come to seek her.

"I should like, if I may, to have a word with you especially," he said.

He assumed her consent that he should accompany her, and they walked towards the lily garden in silence. After a couple of minutes Neill spoke slowly.

"You heard me speak of difficulties just now," he said. "There are difficulties, rather unusual ones. The technical ones are quite serious enough in the ordinary course of things, but these others——," he made a pause.

Berice waited.

"You, Miss Beckwith, if you would, could help me enormously," he continued by and by. "I think you see already what I mean. Obviously it's one thing for Mrs. Finch-Ommaney to tell me I can ask any questions I like, as you heard her just now, and quite another for me to take her at her word. For one thing it would be a cruelty, and for another it would be of very doubtful worth when it was done."

Berice saw the point with the greatest clarity.

"One," Neill continued, "was his mother, the other his betrothed. You understand. . . . I am hoping that these," he tapped the packet in his hand, "that these photographs will form a good enough basis to work on. What I want to ask you now is—whether you'll help too?"

Berice was silent, pondering this exquisite and least of all expected development. Neill continued.

"Let me be quite clear. Artistically, the thing is, of course, an absurdity from the start. A man with a conscience would hardly have undertaken it. The odd thing is that I have a conscience, and I have undertaken it. Usually I watch my man for a year before settling down to actual work at all; in this case I'm reduced to watching him through other people's eyes. Will you lend me yours?"

They had stopped half-way down a path, and Berice's hand was straying over snowy blossoms of phlox. Slowly she passed the other hand across the eyes of which he spoke. Presently, from out of intricacies of thought, she put a question in return.

"Tell me," she said falteringly, "who flattered me by telling you I could help you. Was it Bunny?"

“Bunny? Hartopp? . . . No. For that matter, Hartopp erred—I’m sure he erred—on the other side. Now that he’s got me down here, Hartopp doesn’t seem particularly anxious that I should go on with the job at all. If I must go on, he says, he’ll be able to tell me all I want to know.—No. It was Mrs. Finch-Ommaney herself, who wrote to me at the same time as Hartopp.”

Berice checked a lost and despairing sigh, which, however, did not escape him. He bent his head sympathetically.

“Yes, I know,” he said with a great gentleness, as if he thought he was answering her thought. “I know I’m asking a good deal of you. But if it means so much to you, think what it would mean to *them*! . . . When all allowances are made for his mother’s adoration he must have had a lovable nature. . . . I may say that there’s no immediate hurry. The setting up of the thing will probably take at least a fortnight; I can do that from the photographs; but I thought it better to speak to you at once. Actually it will probably mean no more than your passing a few remarks on my work that quite possibly you would have passed in any case. You won’t know when you’ve helped me most; a chance remark may be of more value than hours of deliberate talk. And I needn’t add that I should consider that you were reposing the very greatest trust in me. . . .”

Berice’s eyes were distractedly on the snowy phlox blossoms. Her brow was beyond her control. She was wondering now why Bunny had apparently sought to persuade his friend *away* from herself as a source of information—and even in the wonder she realized that if, on the other hand, Bunny had specially indicated herself she would have been no less distracted. Poor Bunny could do no right. . . .

But suddenly her lips compressed, and she threw up her head.

“Yes, I’ll help you,” she said in a controlled voice. “You’ll find me here when you want me.”

“Thank you,” Neill said simply. “Then I’ll begin it to-morrow.”

For the setting up in clay of the memorial certain wooden

boxes were necessary, which the heterogeneous lumber of Bunny's painting cottage on the moor failed to provide; and, as other things also had to be ordered in Cotterdale village, Bunny and Neill found themselves on the following midday at the grocer's shop opposite the "Cotterdale Arms." As the pair of them passed into the shop and then out of it again to inspect the crates and boxes on which rested the grocer's display of onions and potatoes they were objects of interest to the half-dozen men who had gathered in the parlour of the "Arms" for their forenoon drinking.

"Who's yon with Mr. Bernal, Ship?" a man asked of Ship Brooke, the landlord.

Ship, who had been peering over the top of the horsehair half-blind, shook his head and passed the question on.

"Who is it, Harry?" he asked in his turn of old Harry Dean, Sir John Hartopp's man.

Harry gave the desired information.

"It's a gentleman called Mister Neill, fro' London. He's stopping with Mister Bernal. He's come to make t' memorial, for t' church."

"Aw! . . . (See, they're off into t' shop again.) . . . To be sure, to be sure. They were down at t' church this morning; they met Mister Emney there. I hear Mister Emney's starting them new ponds as soon as t' hay harvest's ower. That'll make a bit o' trade."

"It seems like waste, wi' that at t' top only just stocked," a man remarked.

"Waste or no waste, it's trade," said the landlord.

Then there followed a brief parenthetical passage.

"Trade?" a man who sat under a picture of Pretty Polly said, with a slow, large wink. "What sort o' trade?"

"Whist, Jake!" another man said, winking back. "Ye oughtn't to talk like that wi' a gamekeeper in the room. That's taproom talk—t'other side o' t' passage for that sort o' talk——"

"What's taproom talk?"

"Poaching's taproom talk."

The man under the picture of Pretty Polly put his head back and composed himself as if to sleep. "Nay, nay," he

said dreamily, "poaching depends on who it is. Ye don't poach from *onnybody*. . . . Ye might *take*," he added, as if as an afterthought.

The landlord, whose eye was at the hole in the horsehair half-blind again, made a movement of his hand.

"They're coming out again," he announced.

Neill was indicating a box under the potato stall. "Two like that will do," he said.

"Send 'em up to my cottage, Tom," said Bunny. "Anything else while we're in Oxford Street, Murragh?"

"Only a sponge and a few nails."

"Peter Robinson's for those. This way——"

They passed out of sight of the watchers at the horsehair blind.

Conjectures as to what the boxes were required for occupied the parlour of the "Cotterdale Arms" for the next few minutes; then somebody asked Jim Bright, who reclined in the window-seat on the nape of his neck and the lower part of his back, what events he had decided to win at the forthcoming Feast. Jim was Bunny Hartopp's faithful dog, and it was his custom each year, when the Ridsdale and Cotterdale Feasts drew near, to tick off beforehand the events in which he proposed to be victorious and to count the prize-money already in his pocket. He named several events now.

"And how much'll that be, if Mister Bernal doesn't run?" Ship asked.

"Three pound ten."

"And how much if he does?"

"Thirty bob, if I win t' Fell race."

"Well, I shouldn't do all t' work and give t' money away myself," the landlord remarked; for the money-prizes foregone by Bunny in Jim's favour were proudly passed on by Jim to the contestant next placed.

Jim merely replied, "Wouldn't you?" and settled himself more comfortably. Nobody in Cotterdale ever charged Ship Brooke with throwing his money about.

A man knocked with his empty glass on the table, and Ship departed to refill it. When he returned it seemed as if

a thought had occurred to him during his absence, for he addressed himself directly to Joe Warry, the head man and husband of the housekeeper at Skirethorns.

"Right, now, Joe, and fair talking," he said ingratiatingly, "what sort *is* this Mister Emney?"

Joe's broad face was a-beam with enjoyment of a particularly smooth-drawing pipe. "Eh? Did ye speak, Ship?" he asked.

"About this Mister Emney: what sort is he?"

"Oh! Mister Emney!" said Joe, contentedly puffing. "What sort is he? . . . Now I don't know, Ship—all things considered—that I've owt partickler to say on the subject."

"It's all right, Joe—Jane's a good two mile away," said the landlord, with an encouraging wink. . . . "Well, is it right that Miss Berice showed him round t' mill?"

Joe peered mildly up through his smoke at the picture of Pretty Polly.

"Well—as for that, Ship—I can't say—searching my mind, like—that I think Miss Berice has owt to do wi' t' present company, as ye might say," he remarked.

A cunning look came into the landlord's face.

"But we can think what we like, if all Rufus says is true," he observed, with another wink.

"He's a noticing chap, is Rufus," was Joe's reply, put forward, as it were, as a detached proposition for the consideration of the company.

A man with a scythe-blade broke the silence that followed. He had not hitherto spoken.

"I met him up t' Brow this morning," he remarked.

"Mister Emney?" said Ship, wheeling round.

"Ay."

"Well? . . ."

"Ay, I met him. . . ."

The English villager is capable of niceties of impression, if not always of expression. Harrison Emney, meeting a labouring man on the road that morning and passing the time of day with him, would have considered the casual affability more carefully had he dreamed that it would be sifted, turned inside out, and have judgment passed on it in

the parlour of the "Cotterdale Arms." That slight over-doing, that careful carelessness, which Berice had discovered in Emney, the village was conscious of at the other end of the local scheme of things. Hence the delicate distinction the "Arms" drew between 'poaching' and 'taking.' . . ."

"Asked after t' wife and childer an' all," the man with the scythe said, with a sort of sub-relish. . . .

"You might ha' got him to stand godfather to t' next," Brooke remarked.

And another man summed up by saying that it would be like taking a linch-pin out when Mister Everard left.

But the sound of a motor clutch was heard outside, and Ship Brooke, at the horsehair blind again, again put up his hand. The man of whom they were speaking and Everard Beckwith were slowing down in the car, and, descending the street again, came Bunny and Neill. Joe Warry knocked his pipe out and left the parlour.

"Ah, here he is!" Emney's voice sounded outside. "Order lunch at the 'Racehorses' for Mr. Beckwith and me, Joe.—Won't you join us, you two? No? Well, my remembrances to Sir John—good-bye——"

The car passed up the street, and the two younger men down it. The landlord withdrew from the blind.

"Lunch at t' 'Racehorses'!" he said. "T' 'Racehorses' gets all t' trade here——"

He had a single spare room over the passage, and it was his grief that it was so seldom occupied.

VIII

“ I ’M becoming more and more doubtful about the whole thing,” said Neill, looking from one to another of the photographs he held as if they were a hand at nap.

“ My boots, Jim. . . . Eh?—Well, I told you it was a rotten job. Chuck it,” grunted Bunny.

“ It’ll be nothing when it’s done——”

“ People will say Murragh Neill’s going off in his work, that’s all.”

Neill put the photographs down on the table.

“ Well, don’t rub it in. *You* asked me to do it, you know.”

“ I know,” growled Bunny, lacing busily. “ You needn’t rub that in either.”

This was a fortnight after Neill’s arrival. Jim Bright had laid cups and saucers for two on the little round table of the painting cottage, and was now rolling up a mattress and making concealment of a cheap iron bedstead that occupied one corner of the principal room. The open doorway framed a bright picture of sunlit heather. The place had been roughly tidied up. Stretchers and canvases and books and papers had been thrust against the walls ; bottles and old jam-pots with brushes in them had been pushed with the foot away into corners ; and a newspaper had been thrown over a miscellaneous litter that included a penny whistle and a shaving brush on which the soap of its last lathering had been allowed to dry. Bunny’s easel was turned face to the wall at one end of the room ; and at the other end, in a position carefully chosen as regarded the window, Neill had set up his work on an improvised turn-table made of wooden boxes. There was clay on the block Jim Bright used for chopping firewood, and an old cavalry sword had been slashed deep

into the lump. An iron kettle that swung from the hook over the handful of fire whimpered with increasing loudness.

"It's your own choice that you go out, you know; it isn't necessary," said Neill, as Bunny stamped his feet and rose. "I'm not going to catechise her—and it wouldn't matter if I was."

"Oh, I'll go," Bunny replied.

"Well, I'll give you pawn and move this evening."

"Right you are," said Bunny, crossing to the door.

But at the door he turned. "I say, Murragh——" he said.

"Well?"

"You might—you might—I hope you'll——" He stopped.

"Hope I'll what? What ails you to-day?"

But suddenly Bunny, with an "Oh, it doesn't matter—so long," left. Neill changed his clay-caked working boots for a pair newly cleaned by Jim Bright, washed his hands at a bucket, dried them on a very damp towel, and then began to cut bread-and-butter.

Berice's figure darkened the doorway so soon after Bunny's departure that Neill felt sure she must have met him; but she had not. She had avoided Skirethorns, she explained—had felt like taking a longer walk—it was such a perfect day—she gave, in fact, an altogether unnecessary number of reasons. As a matter of fact the day was blazing hot; she was on the point of exhaustion; and, when all had been said, it remained unaccounted for that on the open moor, with no cover for a man except the horseshoe butts of peat, she had missed Bunny. But Neill was already occupied with the kettle and the little earthenware teapot.

"Sit down at once, please," he ordered. "You're tired out. And you'd be cooler if you took your hat off. Jim, open the other window. But perhaps you'd rather have tea outside?"

"No," said Berice, dropping heavily into a chair.

Neill poured out tea at once. Berice put aside the plate of bread-and-butter he offered, and sat with the cup of tea in her hand. Neill seemed afraid she was suffering from a touch of the sun.

“Drink it at once and let me fill it again,” he said. Then to himself, setting aside the sunstroke theory, he commented, “Nerves out of order.”

Those nerves of Berice's were far worse disordered even than Neill supposed. Her fortnight at Undershaws had left its mark. She now started if Jim Bright chanced to put down a poker a little noisily, and winced if the sudden passing of a peewit sent a shadow flitting across the door. Her nerves, a fortnight before, had been as steady as steel. . . .

The house itself had wrought on her almost as much as its two chief inmates. These, indeed, had but tapped dramatically home, as it were, the thousand glances and whisperings of the place. They had but given an explicitness to implicit meanings of accusation and horror. In one sense Celia and Mrs. Finch-Ommaney had been supernumeraries—as the prompter is supernumerary to the caste. They had fulfilled their function when the shadowy drama had flagged, by supplying the word and giving the performance a fresh fillip. If, for example, during an hour spent in the billiard-room, Lionel's favourite cue had failed to remind her of the dead hand that had polished it, there had been Celia's involuntary look and sigh—Mrs. Finch-Ommaney's endless and unreticent recollections. If an empty stall in the stable, a tree from which Lionel had once fallen, a cage or a trap Lionel had made, a rod or a bat Lionel had spliced, his dog Sammy, the heads of markhor on the walls, his schoolbooks in the garret, his broken toys, his room—if her spirit rested deaf to the call of these things for an hour, the mother and the sweetheart, each in her different way, had given the tap to attention and crammed it all into her ears again. That she might “have something to remember Lionel by,” Celia had given her, after much deliberation, much turning over of mementoes, many little half-grantings and quick withdrawals as tender associations had recurred to her, a match-box, which she had heroically refused to accept back again; and for mere safety from total distraction Berice had had to harden her heart against the barbed darts of the girl's innocent babble. Once only since that first evening had Celia broken down utterly—Berice, indeed, could not but admire

that, her strength being so little, her courage should be so great; but that once had been enough; it had been an exquisite barb. The sobbed-out words still rang in her ears: "*Oh, if I could only say I was his widow!*" . . . "Oh, Celia, don't break all our hearts!" Berice had groaned in reply. . . . But Celia had not known the reason of the groan. . . .

And Berice was past all compunction now that she dissected Mrs. Finch-Ommaney in these her heavy hours. She questioned their heaviness. She now erred as much on the side of ruthlessness as Everard had erred on the side of simplicity and credulity. She barely remembered that Mrs. Finch-Ommaney had, when all was said, lost an only son. She denied her even the measure of unforced emotion of which she was capable. Emotion? Berice did not believe she felt any emotion! She played an emotional part—a very different thing—but, Berice thought bitterly, never an act ended but she was quite capable of coming before the curtain and taking her bouquet with a smile! Her tears dried with the dispersal of the audience! Such women as she, Berice reflected miserably, gave way to the inordinateness of grief and then married again within the twelve months!

And during the past fortnight Mrs. Finch-Ommaney had played to a very full house indeed. As if already she feared the approach of satiety, she had begun to take her bereavement delicately, daintily, picking and choosing here and there among the tit-bits. . . . Berice remembered some of the tit-bits now. There had been exceedingly delectable morsels over the broken toys . . . there had been those choice *bonnes-bouches*, his old letters home . . . that "Ah, Berice, you'd have understood my feelings better if things could only have been as I hoped" . . . later, when Berice had been unable to conceal her suffering, that "I'm not quite sure now that you knew him as well as I thought, Berice" . . . later still, when Berice's spirit had become still more crushed, that reproachful "Poor Lionel! And *he* was always so fond of *you!*" . . . Yes, no wonder that, after a fortnight of this, always so unexpectedly new, always so harrowingly and monotonously the same, nothing but Lionel, Lionel

and that old buried thing—no wonder that her nerves were out of order and that Murragh Neill should notice it!

The chair into which she had dropped had been that nearest to hand. It stood in direct sunlight, but rather than disturb her Neill drew the frayed old curtain. She had closed her eyes, and without opening them she murmured her thanks. Neill put a magazine into her hand that she might fan herself.

But after her second cup of tea she seemed better. She opened her eyes again with a smile of apology for having caused him trouble; then she lifted them to the cloth-swathed work that surmounted the structure of boxes.

“I see you’ve begun it,” she said.

“Oh,” he replied, “there’s not much there that I couldn’t have done just as well in London—just finger-and-thumb work.”

“I suppose I may see it presently?”

“You may if you like. But it doesn’t greatly matter. Rest for the present, anyway.”

Chief among the ways Murragh Neill had of finding out things he wished to know was to refrain from pressing with questions. His removal of his clayey boots and modelling blouse had been but part of a general putting-off of everything that might have suggested that his purpose was inquisitorial. His first glance at Berice had told him that it would have been better to reserve his inquiry by indirections until another occasion. But his second and third and subsequent ones had told him more. Something was the matter with her. There was something towards which her attitude, let her make what concealments she liked, was one of hostility, of desperation, of helpless resentment that it had power over her while she had no control over it. He imagined he knew what that something was. He jumped to his conclusion.

“H’m! Just as I supposed!” his thought ran. “The mother’s been too much for her. I was afraid that was the way it would go . . . poor girl!” But when she spoke again he fancied he detected still more. Apparently the thing, whether it was the thing he thought or not, had so unnerved her that she now desired to martyrize herself un-

necessarily. She seemed to have so far lost her head over it that, if she could not control it, she was willing to let it have its way with her. She could endure if she could not resist.

“Let me see,” she said, again lifting restless and pursued eyes, “I was to be questioned, wasn’t I?—Ah, no; I’m forgetting; I was just to talk—just to run on——”

He felt that he must stop this, and with as little fuss as possible. His long hand made a gesture as if to calm or to set something aside.

“All in good time,” he said. “Really there’s no need to press matters. Please put it out of your head for the present; as a matter of fact I find I’m not quite so advanced with the work as I thought I should be. By and by.—Won’t you have some bread-and-butter now?”

She took the piece he proffered and put it on her plate, but allowed it to remain there untouched. She gave a little fidgetty laugh.

“I should advise you to take things when you can get them. ‘*Souvent femme varie,*’ you know.”

“Yes, yes,” he soothed her. “All in good time. I certainly shall ask you to help me, later; but it doesn’t matter now. After all, you see, the things you’ll tell me won’t be of much use if they aren’t the things I want to know.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” she persisted impatiently, “we’d better get it over—you’d better let me run on, if that’s the idea, and just tell you anything that comes into my head.”

Still, in spite of her restlessness, she delayed to do so. . . .

He sat, kneading his knuckles, a little set back in his calculations. He had chosen her for this service because he had assumed a certain detachment in her; but actually, she was now less calm than either the mother or the betrothed had been. The persistence with which she hugged a thing that plainly caused her pain distressed him. He recalled the impression, one of sombreness and stagnation, he himself had brought away from the house that had harboured her for the past fortnight; he remembered that, too hastily perhaps, he had classed Mrs. Finch-Ommaney as a woman who quite conceivably might make much of a sorrow she

felt she ought to feel ; and the other girl, Miss Chester, would hardly, he thought, be capable of more than a passive resistance to grief. And that these others might be helped, this exhausted woman in the chair—so much was plain—had devotedly placed her own strength and soundness at their disposal. No wonder she needed a rest! . . . Well, she should rest that afternoon, at any rate. . . .

And yet, Neill could not help thinking, that sacrifice and devotion, which might well have wearied her body, should not have had this effect on her mind. Sacrifice and devotion give, and do not take away, the inner peace of the soul. But it was precisely the lack of inner peace that now distressed him in Miss Beckwith. Even the strain of the fortnight at Undershaws did not seem to explain that satisfactorily. . . .

Then a swift and illuminating light broke in on Neill. . . . The explanation that leaped into his mind might not be probable, but it was at least a possible one, and he was suddenly humbled in his own eyes that he had not thought of it before. He felt guilty of an impertinence of thought even in formulating it to himself, but there it was, capable of explaining all, and, with a sort of full-grown vigour of its own now that it had tardily sprung into being, forcing itself upon him. *Suppose that she too had loved him?* Suppose he had been entirely wrong in assuming that detachment in her? Suppose—suppose—that she had been passed over for another during his life, had had the bitterness of seeing another preferred, and had kept the virginal faith of her heart and the freshness of her kisses for a man who had not wanted them? If it was so, what a fool that man must have been to refuse the love of that heart, the utter giving of those unviolated lips! To be loved by such a woman as this, and not to love in return! What a fool! . . . And she was so fine that she could even go, now, to her sorrowing supplanter, without jealousy, without a single thought of herself, and say, “Here I am—use me!”. . . .

And how they must have used her, to have brought her into this state in a fortnight! . . . Yes, that supposition, if it was true, would account for much. . . . And he himself

was proposing to use her too, was proposing to thrust a finger into that peace of well-doing that, behind her prostration, must possess her heart! And it must, *must* be true! Why, Bunny knew it was true! That was what Bunny had meant by his blundering efforts to put an end to the whole thing. And, of course, Bunny, knowing all this, had had to keep her sacred secret. The only thing that puzzled Neill was why Bunny had allowed him to undertake the memorial at all. . . .

Suddenly Neill looked up with glad and shining eyes. He had taken a resolution. He, at least, could refrain from further burdening that great heart of hers with his own paltry affairs.

"Perhaps," he said in a low voice, hardly daring to look at her, lest she should see the honour and reverence his eyes might shower upon her, "perhaps, before we go any further, I ought to explain a little more clearly my methods of working. I said a little the other day, but very little. I told you I'd hesitated before taking the thing on at all, and I may say that I'm still hesitating. If in the end I decide to throw it up I shall have to ask you to forgive me for having brought you up here this afternoon for nothing."

She looked at him in surprise. "Throw it up!" she exclaimed. "Why on earth should you throw it up?"

He could not well tell her outright what his real reason was. He made as good a compromise as he could on the spur of the moment.

"I told you," he continued, "that that"—he indicated the swathed beginning of the memorial—"that that was mere finger-and-thumb work; and I think I told you, too, that I don't commonly do finger-and-thumb work. I sign my work, you see. And I go more or less deep down into whatever I undertake. There are . . . well, there are some depths I don't care to go down into."

She didn't quite follow. The whole subject was a little foreign to her. Depths? What depths were those? she wondered. . . .

"When I asked you if you'd be so good as to help me," he continued, more haltingly, "I—well, perhaps I spoke rather

hastily—without consideration. Perhaps I was rash—clumsy, perhaps—perhaps I am now——”

At that, something deep-seated within her stirred in vague alarm. Rash? Clumsy? Why should he think himself rash or clumsy in speaking of Lionel Finch-Ommaney to her?

“I’m afraid I don’t quite understand you,” she said, her heart suddenly filled with a desire for stronger support than it possessed.

He dared not put it more plainly. In the blue eyes that were lifted to his all he saw was a slightly displeased look—such a look as there might come into eyes which, having desired to keep a good deed secret, suddenly saw it laid bare.

“Frankly,” she continued, “you seem a little—you must forgive my saying it—a little over-considerate. One would think you saw a special reason why I should be spared something—I can only put it in that way. If that’s so, please put the idea out of your head. My pulse is really quite steady; I assure you there’s really no need for all this delicacy, if it is that——”

She rose abruptly. Actually her pulse was far from steady. She crossed to his work, and took up the photographs he had held like a hand at nap. Again a distress filled him. She was plainly acting out of some kind of mistaken bravado, and, while good deeds ought perhaps to be hidden as long as possible, this manner of hiding them was new—and Neill hoped it would not become customary——

“Look,” she said, turning the photographs over, as if she wished to bring the purpose of her call forward at once and have done with it. “There’s this one, for instance. If I understand you, I’m to point out which were the most like him, and why. Well, there’s this one. He’s got a Service cap in this, but—but I don’t know that it hides anything especially godlike. In general expression it’s very good, as you can see by its resemblance to his mother. His colour was ruddier than hers, and his hair almost black. If his height is of any consequence——”

Neill was suffering. He began a gesture, which she disregarded. She continued with a suppressed bitterness that the calm of her manner only emphasised.

“—for his height, he was a couple of inches taller than Bunny, but he hadn't Bunny's shoulders, of course—though I don't know why I should say 'of course,' since it's all news to you. When he walked he had a way of——”

“Miss Beckwith!——” Neill began, with a voice slightly raised.

“Or is it more his mental beauty you want? As you please. For that, too, you can take his mother as a model, with certain modifications——”

But Neill had risen, crossed over to the hearth, and stood looking down into the fire with his back to her. His attitude suggested deafness to anything further she might say, until she should be pleased to have done with this display. He was increasingly in pain. His hypothesis was slipping away from him, to his bitter disappointment. What she was showing now was not a modest and lovely cover for love and service and devotion, but something capable of a much balder interpretation—mere resentment and unrestraint and breaking down. . . .

“Mr. Neill,” she called, still playing the rather pitiful comedy.

Neill returned abruptly from the hearth.

“I was going to tell you about his eyes—full, dark brown, but more beautiful somehow the first time you saw them than afterwards——”

“Miss Beckwith,” said Neill almost sternly, “do you mind not doing this?”

The weight of the frown on his fine and houndlike face was almost palpable. Berice saw it, and suddenly felt herself fail under it. Only up to a certain point, and under certain restricted conditions, was she an actress; beyond that point, the rôle was sunk in the woman. Swiftly, and for the first time, *she* now saw what she was doing—saying at once too little and too much. Recklessly she had rushed almost to a brink. Without looking where she was going, she had gone in mind back to those distant, dreadful days of years ago when lies and half-lies and quarter-lies, spoken or looked or implied by silences, had made a twilight of the atmosphere she had breathed. She now drew in her breath as she realized

sharply. Was all *that* to begin over again? Was she to go back to *that* horror? Was the flesh to heal, but the scar ever mysteriously to remain? . . . Was her runaway tongue taking her back to all that? . . .

And what was this stranger behind her even now thinking? . . .

And with that thought she felt her whole nature suddenly stiffen to resistance. It was not, be it understood, an open and avowed resistance, but that subtler and more formidable resistance of woman that seems a yielding. Mr. Neill think? Let him but give her a hint and she would take very good care of what Mr. Neill should think! . . . For one moment only there came to her thoughts the wearisomeness of the harking-back on her life it was; but what she had done once she could do again. Whether the lie was to be the half or the quarter, explicitly uttered or allowed to go by implication, she did not know yet; that would necessarily depend on what was in this man's mind; and before she could even find out what that was she must first compose her voice to the proper degree of ordinariness.

"All this seems to me rather extraordinary, Mr. Neill," she said presently. "Tell me—tell me honestly—why you won't ask me things now that you were ready enough to ask a fortnight ago?"

The ground was cut from under his feet. What his respect had avoided, her fear had plunged them into. He could only murmur something about 'A fortnight?—Why not a year?—Or an hour?—Time wasn't really measured that way——'

"A fortnight ago," she pressed him, "you thought there were things you might ask me that you preferred not to ask his mother or his sweetheart. I should have thought that was so still."

At that Neill's heart became suddenly confirmed in its honouring hypothesis again. That, after all, was the point; she *had* sacrificed herself to the mother and sweetheart. Very likely, he thought, she had caught at the first cloak for her goodness that had offered, and if that had happened to be that distasteful bravado its use was none the less

sanctioned by her intention. By whatever means, she kept her secret bravely. . . . His eyes again offered her homage.

"You were very, very great friends," he murmured, trusting her to jump at his meaning.

But she did not see yet where he stood. "Well?" she demanded.

At that he broke out. "And can't you conceive that since I last saw you I have . . . oh, you good woman, won't you take a beautiful thing as said? . . ."

For an instant Berice opened her eyes very wide; the next she had seen—seen that wonderful hypothesis of his. It almost took her breath away. What! He thought she had waited pathetically for the word that had been spoken only to another! *That!* It was actually because he thought her wonderful, selfless, magnanimous, that he sat there silent, kneading his knuckles between his knees! How beautiful! . . .

The hateful cloud that had loomed up for a moment out of the past receded again; she was calm now; she saw how little it needed to banish that stale horror. What this man supposed to be true of her would serve her purpose to admiration; and it was he who put it forward, not she. . . .

Suddenly she told the lie. It needed no word. She told it by a silence and a dropping of her head. Let him think that, then . . .

It was she who broke the long silence that followed. It was necessary to know whether or not she had lied to the purpose. She did not wish to have it to do twice.

"Well," she murmured, with downcast eyes, "we needn't make a fuss about it. You're quite mistaken in supposing there's anything extraordinary about it. I admit I was rather upset when I came in; it's not always very easy over there, after all . . . but I'm all right now. You were quite right in forbidding me to talk, but I'm all right now. And now may I see the portrait?"

She felt 'all right now.' The old anodyne had brought her ease. She approached the shrouded memorial. It was with reluctance that Neill uncovered it; and after a few minutes he covered it again.

“ I don't understand it, of course,” she said, “ but I hope you won't give it up.”

There was no need now for him to say that, whatever he would have done or refused to do for others, it sufficed that she should express a wish. She was making ready to leave. She adjusted her hat before Bunny's mirror, and then, seeing that he also was reaching for his hat, turned.

“ Do you mind if I ask you not to come with me ? ” she said. “ I shall get my uncle to drive me over from Skirethorns.”

“ You'd prefer it ? ”

“ Yes,” she replied, holding out her hand. He smiled gravely as he took it.

“ Portraiture, as I practise it, involves a good many things,” he remarked.

“ It appears so,” she said softly ; and made all sure by adding, “ Privacies among them. Good-bye——”

She left, and he, re-entering the painting cottage, poured himself out a cup of cold tea, less, apparently, for the purpose of drinking it than that he might sit and look at it.

That Neill had not accompanied Berice gave, as it happened, Harrison Emney an opportunity. He had walked up to the trout pool which Berice must pass on her return. But for the uncertainty whether he had seen her, Berice would have waited in one of the breast-high butts of peat until he had gone ; she wanted to be alone, but across a quarter of a mile of heather she saw his hand go to his cap. She could only go forward to meet him. No matter. It only meant company that she did not at all desire just then as far as Skirethorns. . . .

Presently she came up with him.

But he seemed oddly untalkative, and, by the time they had reached the Pool, had ceased entirely to talk. He stopped, and they stood looking over the water.

Then he turned towards her.

“ May I beg for just a few minutes ? ” he asked. He spoke huskily and nervously, and had to repeat his question. . . .

By the time he had said twenty words it appeared that

what he wanted the few minutes for was to ask for Berice's hand in marriage. This must be stopped instantly. It was a contingency, whoever the man might be who should provide the instance, on which her mind had long been made up, and it must end on the spot, at once and for ever. The matter was so immediate that it became almost beside the mark that he was offering her the dearest thing a man may offer. Not one syllable more could she hear. . . .

"It is impossible—impossible—please understand that, now and always, it is impossible!" she said, with an energy that startled him.

"But——"

She almost struck at the air in her attempt to show him the finality of it.

"And I can't even tell you why it is so," she cried.

He took a step back.

"There is—somebody——?"

Neither that nor any other question would she answer. He had not thought she had such peremptoriness in her.

"You may walk back with me on the condition you don't say one word further about this," she said. "Otherwise I must go alone. I haven't said I'm sorry; I am, deeply sorry; but it's so impossible that I must risk appearing brutal rather than that you shouldn't understand. I *do* thank you—I thank you from my heart—I'll write and tell you so if you like—but that's all—all! . . . Will you walk with me, or shall I go alone?"

He realized that another word would drive her from him in headlong flight. But he knew also what impossibilities are. Time sometimes resolves them. . . . His reddish brown eyes seemed moist. He muttered:

"I see I've hit my hour unfortunately. I shall ask you again."

"No other hour will be any more fortunate," she replied, and added, "You can, of course, drive me away from here. . . ."

They set out to walk again, he silent, she with the old burden and weariness that for a space had lifted closing down and making its home about her heart again.

IX

IT is the parasitic nature of a lie that it lives only by the consent and unsuspection of those who do not lie. It does not make any difference whether the cleanness and soundness from which it derives its sustenance be in others or in ourselves; that it may live, something better suffers. And, until the corrupt growth shall have so spread that it outweighs the soundness, the liar himself is conscious of this. Had Neill appeared for one instant to doubt her, Berice would have been angry—and more at her ease; as it was, she felt only the pang of his perfect trust. She could have found it in her heart, too, almost to hate him for his unconscious complicity in the untruth. All unknowing, he had dangled before her eyes the temptation she was least able to resist, and, when she had clutched desperately at that precious hypothesis of his, he had humiliated her with his homage. She would find it hard to forgive him that.

And even this twinge, of honour falsified and a sweet thing tainted, took on an added sharpness from accumulations of the past; for, while the past was in fact past, the memory of it was a current experience. It was with a stab of anguish that, for the first time in her life, she found herself wondering whether the past was ever past. *Was* there such a thing, after all, as that Moral Statute of Limitations that had presented itself so alluringly to her—or had she merely found it convenient to assume its existence without too many questions? Was Nemesis *ever* nonsuited, or was that supposed nonsuiting merely a serviceable falsity, clutched at by men in order that the continuance of their lives should be made possible? A blurred picture seemed to rise before her eyes. An end of twig, cast into a mountain pool, was driven under

by a fall, rose again, descended with the current for a little way, and then, as if guided by a relentless and invisible Hand, travelled slowly up the backwash again. Had she also reached the point where the current and the backwash of her life met? Was she, too, hanging and wavering while freer lives went forward? Was she also, instead of being rid of it all, in reality only beginning it all over again? . . .

It was significant that her unexpected meeting with Emney had only a secondary place in her thoughts. She was sorry for him, but that affair had, of course, been settled before ever it had come up. She remembered again now her old determination of what, in such an event, her course must be. That determination did not include never marrying, but it did include the only terms on which marriage was possible for her. There at least no lie must have any place. No marriage of hers should be based on concealments and implications, and that resolve presupposed certain things in the man who might come even so near to her as to be at last refused. With the vast mass of men she would have declined even the negative connection of being put into such a position that she must let them know that there was something they might not know. Emney had been included beforehand in this number. . . .

And though she had foreseen that events might take this turn, she had not expected it to come so soon. . . .

She had entered Undershaws by a side door, had gone quickly upstairs by a secondary staircase, and had thrown herself, still hatted, into a chair in her bedroom. Presently, she knew, she would be called on by Mrs. Finch-Ommaney to give an account of what had passed between herself and Neill at the painting cottage. Again she strove to see clearly what it was that actually had passed.

And the more she turned it over, the more plainly one thing appeared. It was a disturbing consideration to stand out so clearly from everything else, and her brow was haggard as she faced it. It was, simply, that if ever she should be betrayed it would probably be herself who would be her betrayer. Berice Beckwith would give Berice Beckwith away. So far, thanks to Murragh Neill and his hypothesis,

thanks to Bunny and his blunt loyalty, she had escaped; Neill had the gentle stamp, and Bunny the faithful one; but she shivered at the thought of how she might fare were she ever to be thrown in with men who were not Bunny Hartopps and Murragh Neills. . . . And they would be the little things that would trip her. Against great emergencies she could steel herself; but great emergencies come with comparative infrequency; the things to be feared in life were its absurd, little, neglected, casual surprises. Any moment, unless she could live always surrounded by loyalty and gentleness—unless that unsound thing in her should have soundness to feed on—one of these might take her by the heels.

Again her thoughts turned to the account of her afternoon that must be prepared for Mrs. Finch-Ommaney, and she flung herself back wearily in her chair. With her return to Undershaws she had taken up her hateful load again, and again she felt the miserable anger and resentment rising within her, driving out all charity and mercy. She wondered dully how much more of it she could stand. Not the majesty, but the sentimentality of Death lay like a cloud over the house, and again Berice let her impatience have its head. . . . Granted that Mrs. Finch-Ommaney had lost a son; granted that in the presence of grief tongues must be silent; Berice could nevertheless have ground her teeth over the *self-love*, the *self-pity*, the *self-exposure* of it all. Mrs. Finch-Ommaney made an open display of an appalling moral slackness. This display had reached its climax two days before with the arrival of a letter by the Indian mail. For the last two nights Mrs. Finch-Ommaney had dined alone in her room, and, when the two girls had met her in other parts of the house, only the scantiest details of the letter had passed her lips. To-night she was coming down into the dining-room again. Berice groaned. Oh, how she wished it was all over! . . .

The sound of the first gong brought Berice to her feet, and, as if the physical movement had cut off her heavy train of thought, she suddenly found herself again remembering that she had had an offer of marriage that afternoon. And something in the manner of it struck her for the

first time rather oddly. She pondered this as she dressed slowly. . . .

Technically, of course, it had *not* happened while she had been a guest under Emney's roof; he could certainly urge that in his own defence; but it was a rather ambiguous doubt to claim the benefit of. Yes, now that she thought of it, the thing was more than a little surprising; and she remembered a story of her uncle, an old family story. Everard had come into his property during Berice's grandmother's lifetime, and it had happened—this was years ago—that he had fallen in love with a girl who had been staying in the house. Everard had kept the matter to himself; he had been host, not lover; and he had followed the girl to London after her departure, that he might say elsewhere what he would not say within his own walls. Perhaps his scrupulousness had been no more than a jacket in another form, but, Berice thought, the best part of Life does not consist in too much scorn for jackets. She did not believe that Ev's love had been any less because he had refused to snatch. . . . Well, well: perhaps it only showed that Everard was not Emney; but perhaps it showed something larger than could be included in the nature of either man. The little splash of their departure from Skirethorns had made ripples that had reached as far as the "Cotterdale Arms," but perhaps that splash itself was only the remote ripple of a vaster disturbance—the passing of a whole period and tradition. Yesterday the Beckwiths had been lords of their hour; to-day the Emneys were the masters. . . . no new discovery after all—merely a little newly forced on Berice's attention. . . .

She finished her dressing and went down to dinner.

She was a little early after all. Mrs. Finch-Ommaney had not yet come down, and Celia stood waiting for her, looking down into the fire. She turned to Berice the moment she entered, and spoke without preface.

"Berice," she said in an agitated voice, "I've seen that letter."

Berice's hand stopped midway in the adjusting of a scarf.

"The Indian one?"

"Yes. It comes from a man called Walker, the military chaplain. It seems that—that poor Lionel——" she choked a little.

"Don't talk of it, dear," Berice besought her. It was quite enough that he was dead, without going into the manner of it.

"Oh, I'm not thinking of myself—I'm thinking of mother—I can bear it—but—but—he didn't die at once—he was brought down—this Walker was with him when he died—the letter is full of it——"

Berice frowned in sharp distaste. "Full of it?"

"Yes—a long detailed account——"

"Detailed! What sort of details?" Berice demanded. Surely the opportunity had not been seized for . . . descriptive writing! . . .

"Oh, everything!" Celia moaned.

"Good gracious! . . . I wonder what kind of man this Mr. Walker can be! . . . And she's keeping it, of course."

"Oh, yes; she adores it. . . . Sssh! Here she is——"

Mrs. Finch-Ommaney entered, and they moved at once to the table.

A glance at Mrs. Finch-Ommaney had been quite enough to set Berice once more wondering whether it would not be better to write that letter to Emily Tracy at once and have herself fetched away. She could do no good here. Moreover, if what Celia had just told her was true, there were possibilities of torture ahead that would leave her no course but that of ignominious flight. She had no intention of suffering crucifixion over the contents, whatever they might be, of that letter. And about another thing there was no longer any doubt: whether she had hitherto wronged Mrs. Finch-Ommaney or not by questioning the reality of her grief, it was plain enough now that she had quite abandoned herself to the mere epicureanism of it. The V of black lace was arranged almost coquettishly over her *marquise* hair; a smile, as if at secret things, lurked from time to time about her rather voluptuous lips; her health appeared to be excellent and her appetite, in spite of the way in which she pushed away scarcely touched plates, good; and Berice had

the idea that she dallied with her thoughts and her food in much the same fashion, now in degustation of a tangy savoury, now allowing herself the stimulus of a draught of wine. She watched her for a minute or two, and then bent her eyes upon her own plate and kept them there. She had made up her mind that if that letter was brought up she would at all risks speak plainly.

But Mrs. Finch-Ommaney made no mention of the letter. When she did speak it was to ask the expected question about Berice's visit to Neill. What little there was to report Berice reported briefly. She did not tell Mrs. Finch-Ommaney that Neill had thought of throwing the job up.

"And when are you going to see him again, dear?" she asked.

"We didn't arrange," said Berice. "He hardly appears to be ready yet."

"He's waiting for inspiration, I suppose," Mrs. Finch-Ommaney murmured, with dropped lids and smiling mouth. "Ah, if I could only give him mine! . . . Tell me, darling: were you very conscious of—our lost one—this afternoon? I mean, did you feel as I felt, that he was—hovering near, so to speak?"

Berice murmured some reply, and sought to change the subject: but Mrs. Finch-Ommaney held steadfastly to her course.

"Because," she continued, "the fancy came to me—perhaps it was ridiculous, but I'm sure you'll understand—I imagined that he was very, very close to me—a sort of presence, if you understand me . . . and it's no more than they say when they tell you that you can make somebody turn round by thinking fixedly of them, you know. . . ."

"I'm afraid I don't understand," said Berice shortly, and Celia, too, interposed with a "Mother, dear——"

But Mrs. Finch-Ommaney went placidly on.

"I cannot, cannot believe that all my thought will be allowed to go for nothing. Prayers *are* heard, you know, and it's—it's really very much the same sort of thing. . . . Many things are hidden from us—there is a reason behind all things—and not a sparrow falls, you know, my dears. . . ."

But forgive me for talking like this. You are young and happy—let us talk about something else. . . .”

She took the credit of this last proposal to herself—which Berice would have allowed her had she carried it into effect ; but within five minutes she had returned to the subject again.

“ Mr. Neill didn’t mention, did he, dear, that he was conscious of any—I don’t know how to put it—of any knocking at the door, as it were—any helpful influence ? ”

Berice pushed her plate away with a certain quickness.

“ He didn’t say anything about it,” she said. “ I’m not quite sure, either, that I know what you mean. But, dear Mrs. Finch-Ommaney, there’s something *I* should like to say if I might. I’ve been going to say it for days. It’s this : that Celia and I can’t help you much unless—unless you make an effort to help yourself. Isn’t that so, Celia ? ”

“ Oh, do, mother, dear ! ” Celia implored.

A glance, the quickest imaginable, had shot under the dark fringes of Mrs. Finch-Ommaney’s lids ; but in a twinkling her eyes were downcast again. She spoke with great mildness, as a person speaks who is resolved to be patient under no matter what aggravation.

“ I don’t think you understand a mother’s thoughts, Berice. None but a mother can, of course. I don’t mean that you haven’t been perfectly sweet and considerate : you’ve been a great comfort to me, both of you : and I dare say after all that I expect too much. You’ll come to understand better. . . .”

Berice spoke quietly, but firmly.

“ I understand—forgive me—that this is a little unhealthy in you. It would be so much better if you walked more, or if you got away entirely for a little while ! *Won’t* you go away for a change ? Oh, I wish you would—we both wish you would ! And think of the good it would do Celia ! ”

“ There is love and remembrance wherever we go,” Mrs. Finch-Ommaney said, with tranquil reproach. “ If you should ever have a little one of your own in your arms——”

“ Oh, do, *do* go away somewhere ! ” Berice implored again. “ This is simply losing your hold on everything ! ”

It's breaking down—something not quite pleasant to think of—it's—it's positively irreligious!"

Mrs. Finch-Ommaney blandly raised her arched brows. "Irreligious, Berice?" she murmured.

"Well, it's—you must forgive my saying so—it's dreadfully—lax."

"Irreligious, Berice!"

She murmured the word again to herself. "Irreligious! . . ." She was exquisitely shocked; her dear Berice say that! Really, she could hardly believe she had heard aright! . . .

Berice knew that a hostility between herself and Mrs. Finch-Ommaney was already born.

"But surely, Berice, darling," the mother murmured presently, "that is precisely what it is *not*! I can't think you're serious! Surely it is the very, *very* opposite! Haven't they some new name for it that signifies the very opposite?"

"Some new name for what?" Berice asked.

There was no hurrying Mrs. Finch-Ommaney to her point, whatever it was.

"Why, darling, for what we're talking about. I dare say you know far more about such things than I do—modern thought, I mean—you're young, and very likely I get things mixed up—but don't they call it Christian Science? Or is there nothing in that?"

It was with difficulty that Berice restrained a blunt and downright "Oh, Lord! . . ."

"But perhaps I'm thinking of Spiritualism," Mrs. Finch-Ommaney murmured evenly. . . .

With a great effort Berice mastered herself.

"But, dear Mrs. Finch-Ommaney, if you persist in this what *is* the good of Celia and myself being here to distract you?" she cried, with a sudden outspreading of her hands.

So equably came Mrs. Finch-Ommaney's reply that Berice sought in vain which of two interpretations to give to it. "But you *do* distract me, dear! . . ."

They finished dinner almost in silence; but in the drawing-room it almost seemed as if Mrs. Finch-Ommaney had resolved to pursue Berice with the distasteful subject. Again

she referred to the memorial, and again Berice sought to turn her thoughts by multiplying her material attentions. She told herself that to give way to irritation was to prove herself of little better stuff than this weak-minded woman, who, properly handled, had in her the makings of a first-class mooning ecstatic.

“ Perhaps, dear, I *did* mix things up a little,” Mrs. Finch-Ommaney crooned, as if resolved that any unreasonableness there might exist should be all Berice’s. “ Of course, Christian Science *isn’t* the same thing as Spiritualism. I’m afraid I don’t know the precise difference—there are so many of these cults—is it cults? . . . Yes, I confess I’m a little vague about them, but they seem to me to have the same general idea underlying them. . . . Do you really think there’s anything in Communication? ”

“ In——? ” Berice did not quite comprehend.

“ In Communication. Not necessarily table-rapping, of course. . . . ”

It might have been half deliberately said, for purposes of provocation; it might have actually shown approximately the trend of her thought; all was one; it was too much for Berice. In one corner of the drawing-room was an escritoire. Quickly Berice rose and crossed to it. Mrs. Finch-Ommaney was dreamily smiling again, head back and eyes closed.

“ What are you doing, dear? ” she asked presently, opening her eyes for a moment.

“ I’m looking for a pen,” Berice replied. “ I want to write a letter.”

“ But the letters are collected. Won’t it do in the morning? ”

It would have done equally well in the morning, for the letter Berice wanted to write was the one to Emily Tracy, to ask her to take her away from Undershaws. But even in the act of drawing up her chair she changed her mind and pushed it away again, a little ashamed of her own petulance. She returned to Mrs. Finch-Ommaney’s side. . . .

“ Yes, darling, write it in the morning,” the mother murmured. “ I’m sure you’re tired to-night. . . . ”

But Berice had sunk to her knees. She turned up an imploring face.

"Oh, do, do, *do* put these horrid thoughts away!" she pleaded, taking Mrs. Finch-Ommaney's hand. "Celia and I will do anything, anything for you, if you'll only help yourself a little! Let us take you away—we'll all go—we'll go to Bournemouth—the Isle of Wight—anywhere, just the three of us—we'll go at once—*do* say you will!" She made little appealing pressures of the hand as she talked.

"What dear, attentive children I have!" Mrs. Finch-Ommaney murmured. . . . "But I wonder why you called it 'irreligious,' Berice?"

"Will you come away next week, with Celia and me?"

"Surely not just at once, Berice!"

"Yes, at once—please, *please!*"

Mrs. Finch-Ommaney stroked Berice's hair with her other hand. She dropped her lids again and smiled enigmatically.

"It might be a very good idea; we will talk about it. . . . Speaking of letters, by the way, did you get the one that came this afternoon?"

"No."

"Oh, then it must be still waiting for you in the hall."

Still Berice persisted, and Celia added her entreaties.

"But you will come away?"

"We'll talk about it, dear. Won't you get your letter?"

Berice, entering that afternoon by the side door and going straight to her room, had missed the table with the letters on it. She rose from her knees with a sigh, and rang the bell for her letter. It was brought. As she took it she noticed that the writing was Emily Tracy's. She opened and read it. It ran:

"DARLING BERICE,

"What do you think? Father's suddenly taken it into his head to rush the whole family off to Norway for the rest of the summer. We start on Monday. I do wish you could have come too, but it was quite impossible; we shall be three in a bed most likely as it is. (Do you remember

Joe Warry that day, when he said we were 'as throng as three in a bed'?) This is just a line, as I've fifty things to do in about four minutes. Much love from all of us.

"Your ever affectionate friend,

"EM.

"P.S.—Isn't this perfectly awful about poor Lionel Finch-Ommaney? We saw it in the *Times*. I'm so sorry we couldn't manage one extra for Norway, but you will come and stay with us as soon as we get back, won't you?"

X

“CHECK,” said Neill, as he slid a bishop up the board. . . . “You saw that, didn’t you? Have it back if you like, but there’s not much else to do.”

“I resign,” said Bunny.

“This is where you went wrong.” Quickly Neill reset a position. “Here—this is your best move; then you wouldn’t have had that thorn in your side all along.” He pointed to a doubled pawn. . . . “Care for another game?”

“Anything you like.”

The board was reset, the opening moves made, and the chess silence fell. Bunny leaned back in his chair while Neill crouched over the game. It was some minutes later that Neill, looking up, hinted, “Your move.”

“Eh? I beg your pardon. I thought it was yours——”

He made a move, and Neill crouched again.

“Ah!” he said presently. “You really mean that? Very well. *Check*. . . . But I say: you’re tired; this position’s merely stupid; let’s drop chess and talk.”

“Anything——”

The chess table was pushed back to the wall of the little smoking-room.

“By the way,” said Neill, “what was that you were going to say this afternoon, just as you went out? You were going to say something. ‘I might—you hoped’—something or other——”

Bunny gave a yawn and a stretch.

“Was I? I don’t remember.”

“Oh, yes, you do; just as you were leaving——”

“Oh, about Berice Beckwith! I was only going to say that I hoped you’d remember she’d probably had as much

of it as she could stand over there at Ridsdale. But it was what she came for, I suppose, so . . .” Bunny gave a shrug.

“I see,” said Neill, nodding. Then he added, after a minute in which the pattern of the lid of the tobacco jar on the mantelpiece seemed to engross him, “I don’t think, if I’d known just how it was, that I should have asked her.”

“Why not?”

Neill looked hard at Bunny for a moment, and then at the lid of the tobacco jar again; then he felt behind him for a chair, drew it up, and sat down.

“Oh, for the same reason you give—that she’s already had as much of it as she could stand,” he replied quietly.

Bunny had sat down in a deep chair with large ears, and Neill could only see the pipe of him sticking out beyond the curve. Had he been able to see more he would have noticed the look of trepidation that had come into Bunny’s face. Neill’s words, by his manner of pronouncing them, had been as much a question as a statement, and it had seemed to Bunny that what Neill had really asked had been whether he might assume a certain knowledge on his, Bunny’s, part also.

“Oh, is that all!” Bunny grunted from behind the lug of his chair.

“That’s all,” said Neill. He spoke the words invitingly into the air.

“I see. . . . You mean, that isn’t all?” Bunny asked.

“I mean what I say—to exactly the same extent that you do,” Neill replied.

There was a silence, during which Neill appeared interested in nothing on earth so much as in the polish of the bowl of his pipe. It was Bunny who spoke next.

“Well?” he demanded.

“Well,” Neill murmured to the pipe bowl, “well . . . that’s about all, isn’t it? Shall we play chess again?”

It *was* about all, short of open and deliberate discussion—dissection, perhaps—of the person named. If inviting beginnings were not taken up chess might just as well be played—better, perhaps.

“In a minute,” said Bunny. . . .

But Bunny's minute lengthened itself out into several minutes, and still he had not risen to wheel up the chess table again. Bunny knew Neill. His gentleness he never doubted, but his cleverness he feared exceedingly. Why had he thought fit to raise this subject, and what had he meant by that sudden breaking off again? What had happened that afternoon that Neill should seem thus to take for granted that Bunny already knew something he himself had recently learned? There must be many such things, of course; but Neill's manner had seemed to particularize. What did Neill know, or think he knew, that assumptions and silences and reticences should as much as be raised? It was of the greatest consequence, if Bunny was to be of service, that he should not be ignorant of anything that was going on. . . .

"What do you mean?" he demanded abruptly. "What do you *really* mean?"

Neill turned to the little silver mounting of his pipe.

"Mean?" he said with aggravating slowness. . . .

"What do you suppose I mean? . . . I mean, of course, that while the other seems a very gentle and sweet girl, there's simply no comparison."

Bunny sat for a moment forward, and looked round the lug of the chair.

"The other? What other? What are you talking about?"

Neill gave him a look and turned to the pipe again.

"Miss Chester, of course. What other should I mean?"

"Miss Chester?" said Bunny in surprise, relapsing into his sheltering chair again. "You're a queer chap, Murragh! . . . What on earth makes you bracket 'em together like that?"

"Bracket 'em together? That's just what I wasn't doing."

"That's just what you *were* doing."

"Was I?" said Neill with a detached air. "It's in your mind the bracketing exists, then, not in mine. But let's be plain. All that I mean, in one word, is that I think Miss Beckwith is magnificent. Have you got that?"

Bunny had not quite got it.

“Magnif——” he began to echo, not immediately, but after some moments; and then stopped.

“Yes,” said Neill. . . . “Turn your chair a bit if we’re to talk. I can’t see you.”

“Humph!” said Bunny, not, however, moving his chair. . . .

He was entirely puzzled. He was wondering, not where Berice’s magnificence came in, but what the explanation could be of this sudden conviction of Neill’s of that magnificence. He would have asked Neill outright what she had said to give him that conviction, but remembered that it did not of necessity follow that she had said anything at all. It was exceedingly perplexing, and it was becoming each moment more imperative that he should know all there was to know.

“Why, don’t *you* think so?” came Murragh’s voice, in slight surprise.

“H’m—m,” said Bunny again. . . . “You see, you’ve rather an advantage over me there, Murragh.”

“What advantage? Do you mean that you *don’t* think so?”

“Oh, no, not necessarily that. I mean that I’m at the disadvantage that I’ve known her all my life, you see.”

“Well, some men wouldn’t call that a disadvantage—but I see what you mean; I suppose you *can* become so familiar with a wonderful thing that a stranger has to come to point out the wonder of it to you. Humph! . . .”

Neill repeated the “Humph!” Then, as he turned the thing over in his mind, he saw fit to repeat it again, more slowly. It was now he who in his turn could not make it out at all. Bunny had known Miss Beckwith all his life; Neill had only half meant his ironical remark about living with a wonderful thing until it is stale and a matter of course—Miss Beckwith could never become that; and apparently, in spite of his “not necessarilies” and so forth, Bunny did *not* find Miss Beckwith magnificent. It was odd. There were only two inferences to be drawn—either that Bunny knew something that Neill did not know, or else that he did not know the thing Neill had assumed he knew. The first alternative Neill instantly set aside. There was hardly

room in a life so short as Miss Beckwith's for more than one central heroism such as he had discovered in her that afternoon, more than one fact of such magnitude and beauty ; that one outstanding experience of nobility and devotion must be the greatest fact of her life ; and for the existence of that he had her own word. No : the second alternative must be the true one. . . . And yet, closely as he did not doubt she had kept her precious secret, it was odd that Bunny should be ignorant of it. Bunny was slow to speak, but by no means slow to notice ; and yet he had not noticed this ! . . . Well, since he did not know, it was not Murragh Neill's business to tell him. If Miss Beckwith had wished him to know the story of her rejected love she would have told him herself. Decidedly she did not wish him to know, and this instantly became a double magnificence in her. Neill was silent in the contemplation of her splendid concealment. . . .

Bunny, for his part, behind the sheltering ear of his chair, was wondering more anxiously than ever what Neill was driving at. There was no doubt that Neill had taken some knowledge or other on his part very confidently for granted ; what was that knowledge ? It was not possible, by any stretch of the imagination, that that knowledge could be . . . well, that it could be the only thing it *could* be—Heavens, no ! Had *that* been so, Neill, far from finding Berice magnificent, would hardly have been speaking of her at all. There *was* something else, and Bunny's brow was knotted in his perplexity as to what it might be. At that moment Bunny had not the faintest intention of turning his chair for Neill's convenience in talking to him. . . .

At last he moved. He gave it up.

"Chess is easier, Murragh," he grunted in despair. . . .

Neill stretched himself, but did not take the hint.

"Well," he said, with a short laugh at the perversity of the situation, "there's no reason why we shouldn't talk about *him*, at any rate. If I'm to get a kind of composite photograph through other people I may as well have your contribution too. Tell me about him."

Bunny was instantly wary. He spied another bracketing here.

“ Young Lionel ? ” he said slowly. “ I suppose you mean him. . . . What do you want to know ? ”

Neill answered lazily, off-handedly.

“ Oh, anything you like. It doesn't much matter where you begin. Begin anywhere. . . . What, for instance—barring one unaccountable stupidity he seems to have committed—was his attitude to women ? ”

Bunny passed his finger-tips over his eyeballs. A sharp involuntary “ *Eh?* ” had been checked only just in time on his lips.

“ His attitude to women ? ” he repeated guardedly. “ What about it ? ”

“ Yes. What about it ? ”

Bunny deliberated.

“ Well, if you want to know, he was——”

But whatever the sentence was that Bunny had meditated, he never completed it. Suddenly he jumped out of his chair, agitated and unstrung.

“ Look here, Murragh—the fellow's dead,” he stammered.

“ Ah ! ” said Neill, not moving, and again entirely absorbed in the contemplation of his pipe. “ I hope you don't mean that you can't find anything good to say of him and so you won't say anything bad ? That's what that phrase usually means. . . . ”

This was the kind of thing in Neill Bunny feared. An embarrassed red flushed his face. He made a little desperate gesture with his clenched fist.

“ I wish to goodness you'd throw the job up to-morrow, Murragh ! ” he broke out. “ You'll make nothing of it. Chuck it. Chuck the whole thing. If Mrs. Finch-Ommaney wants it, let her go to any ordinary mud-puncher for it—she won't know the difference. Chuck it, Murragh.”

It seemed to Bunny, and he was afraid to see it, that his friend's fine mask had never resembled that of a bloodhound so much as in that moment. Slowly Neill shook his head.

“ Can't now, Bunny,” he said shortly. “ I've promised Miss Beckwith. Besides, I shall go ahead now if it's only for my own fun. My credit's lost over the job anyway, so I may as well get all the amusement I can. May I make a

guess? It is that I'm inclined to think that you didn't like the fellow very much."

Bunny's agitation increased.

"I won't say I'm glad he's dead," he began, and then, his tone suddenly changing to one of startling vehemence, he cried, "but I do wish to God he'd never been born!"

He had half raised a clenched fist. From the waist up, from his very feet that took hold on the rug, his attitude was the practised, dangerous, mechanically-assumed attitude of the skilled fighter who meditates a blow. And the blow, apparently, was for a man who lay under the earth many thousands of miles away. . . . These were the things Murragh Neill wanted to know. These were the things that presented Lionel Finch-Ommaney to him. . . .

He gave one glance, and then deliberately turned his eyes away.

"Oh, drop it, Murragh!" Bunny groaned, suddenly relaxing his attitude and falling into the chair again.

Neill made no reply.

His first thought was, "So *you* were in love with her; I thought so, but I wasn't sure"; but his next was more intricate. Nay, it was exceedingly intricate, for how was Bunny's momentary and surprising outburst to be reconciled with his ignorance of the fact that made Miss Beckwith so magnificent—with his seeming though unspoken denial of the magnificence itself? How could Bunny hate Lionel for his refusal of this superb woman if he did not know of that refusal? It was baffling. Neill was all at sea. Something was wrong, somewhere. . . . He would have given a good deal to be rid, for one quarter of an hour, of that in his blood which forbade him to ask the point-blank question.

"Well," he remarked at last, "I must say that the more I see of all this the less simple it becomes."

"Of all what?" Bunny asked, again stung with quick fear.

But the fear, as it happened, was groundless this time.

"Of the allowances and deductions and so forth I shall have to make for the kinks in my channels of information," Neill replied. "You're a particularly kinked channel to-night."

Bunny, behind the lug of his chair again, almost groaned. Neill's resemblance to a bloodhound was only fortuitous, but a terror had bit by bit fastened itself upon Bunny's fancy. He imagined his friend unleashed—saw him nose to earth even now. Had he found? Had he met with a check? Was he picking up again as he contemplated the polish of his pipe bowl? . . . Nobly mute Murragh would always run; when all was over he would not once have given tongue; but there came over Bunny a despairing sense of the futility of any course except the impossible one of giving Neill, in ten words, the true facts.

And that was impossible because the secret was not his own.

And yet in a sense it *was* his own, since he was not known even by the secret's proper mistress to possess it. . . .

It was merely stalemate between himself and Neill, each supposing himself to know, and each knowing, something that the other did not.

"Oh, Murragh, how I wish I'd never asked you up!" Bunny sighed presently. . . . "Please, please will you drop it? Do drop it, there's a good chap!"

Neill spoke quietly. "Drop what? The portrait?"

"The portrait. Questions. Miss Beckwith. That dead noodle. Everything."

"Oh?" said Neill slowly. . . . "Anybody would suppose——"

"*Don't* suppose!" Bunny broke in. "Don't do anything. It's—it's not for anybody but myself I ask it—it's just for myself. Take it if you like that *I've* made a mess of things. I have—I have made a mess of things," he continued recklessly, bent on diverting Murragh at all costs. "I'm not going to tell you how, because I simply don't want you to know"—(*that*, Bunny thought, ought to settle Neill)—"and if anything seems odd it's me, *me*, you understand. You *do* understand that?"

Neill did not quite understand; and not to understand annoyed him. A purely intellectual curiosity in such matters was a need to be satisfied, and Bunny was not satisfying it. Again he tried to grasp Bunny's importance as a factor of

the problem. Bunny, of course, loved Berice; Berice had loved the other—the young noodle; was the real trouble, then, that, Bunny's entreaties notwithstanding, she still refused him, intended to remain faithful to a mere memory, to the living man's exclusion? If so, that might or might not be magnificent; it was not easy to say; it might be an immature and mistaken idealism: very likely it was: all that could be said was that it was hard, confoundedly hard, on Bunny. . . .

The next moment Bunny had chimed in with Neill's thoughts. He had given a little choke, and from behind the chair-wing his voice had sounded.

"Oh, you aren't a fool, Murragh! You see I love her!" he almost sobbed.

"Oh, yes," said Murragh absently. . . . It was quite plain that Bunny loved this woman whom he did not appear to consider magnificent.

"Then can't you—can't you——" Bunny appealed brokenly.

Bunny had turned in the capacious chair so that one shoulder showed. Neill did not like the way that shoulder heaved. He grumbled gently:

"Oh, hang it all, man, don't!" he grumbled, himself in pain. "I say: I'll do anything you like, but stop this, please. Yes, anything you like. I'll see Miss Beckwith and get my promise back, and then clear out. Will that satisfy you?"

But again at this Bunny looked up quickly. Speak to Miss Beckwith? That would hardly do either. Suppose she, too, should begin to make guesses and to credit Neill with the very knowledge Bunny was trying to keep from him? She might do that—might suppose, now that Bunny had given her the safety-pin, that there had been talk. . . .

But no: Bunny did not know that the gift of the pin had after all meant anything at all to her. . . .

"Must you do that?" poor Bunny asked faintly. "Must you see her?"

"Oh, I think so. It's the least I can do under the circumstances," said Neill.

“ Oh, Lord ! ” Bunny groaned. Any grasp of the situation he had ever had seemed now to have slipped away from him.

But Neill had risen and was walking about the room. He was pondering his second hypothesis that day—that Bunny was, in fact, being sacrificed to the loved shade of one who had not loved in return. Could that *possibly* be made to explain Bunny’s unspoken denial of Miss Beckwith’s magnificence ? At a pinch, Neill thought, it might. Such a resolve, if it was a girl’s dream, was perhaps belated in one who was after all no longer a girl : if anything else, it was Olympian in a workaday world . . . too Olympian . . . Neill shook his head. . . .

“ I’ll tell you what I’ll do,” he said at last. “ I never really liked the job, and I’m rather inclined to wish now, with you, that I’d never come here. So I think the best thing I can do will be to see Miss Beckwith. I’ll tell her—Heaven forgive me for deceiving her even so little !—that I find I can’t do it under the conditions. Then I’ll pack up and get off back to London. Will *that* do ? ”

Still Bunny showed indecision.

“ I wish it could have been done some other way. I don’t like the idea of her thinking that we’ve been—talking it over—her share in it—she’ll be pretty sure that we have—you see what I mean ? It isn’t that I want you to stop the portrait—I only want you to accept things as you find them——”

Neill shook his head in weary impatience.

“ Well, if it’s not to be that, what *is* it to be ? I must either do it or not do it, and it’s only right to Mrs. Finch-Ommaney that I should make up my mind without losing any more time. She’ll have to get somebody else, you know. Look here, Bunny,” he broke out suddenly, “ we’ve been rather beating about the bush, and it’s just possible after all that I’ve been talking of cheese and you of chalk. Decency’s all very well ; I hope we’re both decent enough not to have to worry too much about that ; so let’s talk plainly for one half-minute, and then, if you like, forget all about it. At first, when we began this talk, I thought you didn’t know something ; now I see you didn’t know *I* knew it. Well, I do. Let’s put it in a nutshell and have done with it. *He* didn’t

love *her*, but she loved him ; *you* love her ; and she still loves him. Whether she'll go on doing so of course we don't know, but as it stands at present she loves him or his memory enough to give the rest of her life up to it. If you think that that isn't quite so fine as it sounds at first, I don't know that I don't agree with you ; it's too lofty for human nature's daily food, perhaps.—There, we've got it out at last ! At least, this is my interpretation of it all, and it's why I said she was magnificent."

Bunny could scarcely restrain a gasp. So *that* was it ! *That* was the way Neill had pieced things together ! Beautiful, beautiful ! So brave an edifice, on such a foundation ! Beautiful ! . . . And then all at once a vast curiosity to know more took him. But at the same time he must be careful not to as much as touch that edifice for fear it should come down. It was only to be looked at. . . . Mingled with his curiosity, too, was an immense relief. So long as Neill thought *that*, Berice's secret still lay between them.

"She's told you all that ? . . ." he asked in a low and admiring voice.

"Not in so many words, of course,"

"No, of course not. But . . . ?"

"In her own way. It wasn't exactly an easy thing to tell," said Neill, with a slight shrug.

Bunny waited for a full minute. *That* was all right then ! . . . It was by no silence that, at the end of the minute, Bunny lied.

"You're very clever," he said, with his eyes on the ground. . . . "And, of course, you're—you're perfectly right."

He seemed to look on his lie almost with satisfaction. Yes, it would do. . . .

And now that Neill thought this, and the danger to Berice was past, there was no special reason why the memorial should not go forward. Neill would spare his magnificent woman now. . . . Bunny rose almost gaily.

"Well, since you know all about it, Murragh, that alters matters entirely. There's only one other thing we need mention : need you worry her any more about it all ? Won't I do ? I'll try to sink my prejudices—as you say, I didn't

like him—and that'll leave Berice practically out of it.—And after all," he added, a little incautiously, "the thing's going up in a church, not in a Court of Justice——"

"Justice? . . . Do you mean the spirit it's to be done in?"

Bunny took himself up hastily. "See how I keep my word about my prejudices!" he laughed. "Of course—the spirit it's to be done in—that's what I mean—if I meant anything. I'm so tired——"

Neill made a grimace, but he was no less relieved than Bunny.

"So I go on with it? . . . And what about my Art?"

Bunny laughed again. "Your Art's safe enough. I wish I was as sure of beating Jim Bright in the Fell race as I am that your Art can take care of itself."

He said it lightly; but in his heart, as one breathless surmise as to what had actually passed between Neill and Berice succeeded another, there was the growing belief that Berice had indeed been magnificent, in a sense his friend little dreamed of.

XI

EVERARD BECKWITH'S plans, which the fascination of the new ponds had interrupted, had been to proceed to London and there to put up at the small Bloomsbury hotel he used on his infrequent visits to town; and among his postponed delights were afternoons to be spent among the specifications for jackets to be found in the library of the Patent Office, Holborn, W.C. Berice, meanwhile, was to have gone to the Tracys, or to their neighbours the Howitts. There were other houses, too, where, under ordinary circumstances, she might have "sung for her supper." But the very fact that the Beckwiths were known to be leaving Skirethorns gave it to be supposed that they themselves would prefer to be at least temporarily established before paying visits elsewhere.

And Berice herself was strongly of the same opinion. Even could she have endured very much more of Undershaws her standing at Mrs. Finch-Ommaney's was an anomalous one. She was neither at home nor, strictly speaking, visiting. And at the Howitts' it would be little better. She wanted now to be settled with as little loss of time as possible, and she sought an opportunity of speaking to Everard about it.

She found it one afternoon in the field they were making ready for the annual Feast. The field lay at the foot of the precipitous spur of Fell that divided Ridd and Cotter, and Berice had driven to Cotterdale village more for the sake of the air than for the urgency of the errand that had taken her to the village chemist's. From the bridge she had seen her uncle crossing a rough pasture that adjoined the fair field; and, taking the short way of a field-path, she had hurried after him.

She overtook him at the gate of the field. He was looking up at the cloudless sky and the steep Fell, mentally marking weather portents. He turned.

"You here, Berice? . . . It's going to be bad footing for the Fell race; those bents will be as slippery as glass this hot weather. . . . How's Mrs. Finch-Ommaney?"

"Pretty well. . . . Come somewhere where I can talk to you, Ev."

She led the way past a large tent that half a dozen men were laboriously hoisting about its central pole, and leaned against a low wall. Everard's eyes were interestedly on the men at the tent-ropes as he said, "Well, what is it, Berice?"

"I want to know when we're going away," Berice said abruptly.

"Oh! . . . Of course; yes. . . . Well, I'm ready, in a sense, any time. It's chiefly a question of Emney's convenience. Is the time hanging heavy?"

"Yes, it is," said Berice shortly.

"Ah! Well, we must see what's to be done." His eyes wandered to the ribbon of road that wound round the hill to Ridsdale, and he smiled. "Well, we must see what's to be done; but—there's one thing I don't think you're very well cut out for, Berice."

"What's that?"

"Nursing."

There was hearty assent in Berice's reply. "No. I agree with you. I don't think I am."

"Ah! . . . Well, well. I see. I see. . . . Is she—very——?" Everard asked delicately.

"She is. Very," Berice informed him with urgency.

Everard gave a gentle sigh. "Poor woman!"

Berice fumed. She did not just then share her uncle's gentleness.

"Poor woman!" said Everard again. . . . "But be a little patient, Berice. I dare say she's a little trying, but it's been a great blow to her. . . . She's a Palinfield," he continued wandringly, "and the Palinfields are all a bit like that. I remember old Palinfield; and poor Lionel had a touch of it too. . . . Try to stand it, dear."

Berice turned impatiently.

"Do you suppose I haven't tried, Ev? . . . And I'd go on trying if I thought I was doing one atom of good, but I'm not. I really doubt whether she wants me; it's certainly not pleasant."

"H'm!" said Everard thoughtfully. "That's a pity. . . . Well, if it's as bad as all that you'd better leave."

"And go where?" Berice asked.

"Just look at the way those chaps are handling that pole! . . . Well, you seem a bit run down. Perhaps a complete change would do you good. Do you think Emily Tracy would be glad to see you?"

"They've gone to Norway."

"Have they? I must look up the weather-charts and see what sort of weather they're having. . . . Then what about the Howitts, or the Dickensons?"

"I don't think I want to go to friends. I want to know what *we're* going to do, you and I."

"Well, why not come back to Skirethorns till I'm ready? I don't suppose that will be more than a fortnight. In a sense you're still there; you didn't go to Mrs. Finch-Ommaney's for any specified time."

"Oh! . . . You think I'm still there?" Berice asked, apparently privately relishing something that after all she did not seem to find very relishable.

"In a sense, I suppose you might consider yourself so."

She knew she had it in her power to force Everard's hand; she had merely to say that Emney had asked her to marry him and he would see the impossibility of a return to Skirethorns. But since she had no intention of accepting Emney she was bound to keep his secret. She tapped her foot petulantly.

"Tell me how long these ponds are likely to take you, at the very outside," she demanded.

"As I say, perhaps a fortnight. You see, he put it quite plainly to me at the beginning, and I agreed. It would be difficult to withdraw now."

"And then we go to London?"

"Yes, if that's where you'd like to go."

Berice drew a long breath, as if she hoped to draw in with it renewed powers of patience and endurance.

"All right," she said. "A fortnight. But make it less if you can."

"Very well. I'm sorry you've found it too much for you, my dear. . . . They're bungling dreadfully with that tent; if they got on the other side they'd have the wind to help them. . . ."

For a while longer they watched the men who struggled with the flapping canvas, and by the time Berice left Everard had taken charge of the operations and had hardly a care in the world.

Berice had intended to drive back to Undershaws; Mrs. Finch-Ommaney's little victoria was waiting for her at the "Racehorses"; but as she was crossing the pasture to the bridge again she saw Bunny Hartopp with his hands in his pockets, slouching towards the fair field. A little to her right there was a gap in the wall; she hesitated, and then turned towards it, in order that Bunny might avoid her if he wished. That seemed to be his habit nowadays, and, though she had not mentioned it to Neill, she was pretty sure that, as she had approached the painting cottage a day or two before, she had seen Bunny slip behind one of the horse-shoe butts of peat on the moor.

But this time Bunny, instead of avoiding her, strode towards her, lifted his cap, and, after a rather strained greeting, asked her if she was tired.

"No. Why?" she inquired.

"I was thinking that if you were walking back to Undershaws I might walk with you."

"Jack's waiting for me at the 'Racehorses.'"

"Oh, all right if you'd rather not."

Berice hesitated for a moment, and then made a decision. "Oh, very well. We'll walk if you'll send up to the 'Racehorses' and let Jacky know we've gone on."

"Pht! Tom!" called Bunny.

There were half a dozen lads hanging about. One of them started forward. Bunny sent him off with the message, and then he and Berice took the road in silence.

Perhaps Berice had accepted Bunny's company less because she wanted it than to let him see she was not afraid of it. And she thought she knew why he had asked to be allowed to come with her. She was jumpy again ; everything in her life seemed to conspire to push her to an extremity : and she gave contrarities expectation and welcome. Already she had forgotten that sharply-seen peril that had been so plain to her after her reckless passage with Neill—that if she was to be betrayed, it would be she who would betray herself. And here was Bunny, if not with a safety-pin, probably with some other goading device. Ah, yes, she thought bitterly and with defiance, she knew what Bunny wanted to walk with her for. He wanted to talk about Lionel. Everybody nowadays seemed to want to talk about Lionel. They reserved their talk about Lionel expressly for her, and when they could not think of anything further to say about Lionel they sent to London for their friends, in order that they, too, might talk about him. One would have said that Lionel had had to die before he could truly come to life, the air so bristled with Lionel ; no wonder that Bunny wanted not to be out of the fashion. . . .

She grew momentarily more reckless in thought as she strode along in silence by Bunny's side. She had begun to hate the very name of Lionel. *She* did not want to talk about Lionel ; she was almost conspicuous in that, since everybody else seemed to want to do so ; and in a sense, *not* to talk about him was almost to proclaim his name aloud—she was jumpy enough to think that, believing, and, of course, not believing it. . . . It was a moment full of peril for her. She played with the peril. She asked herself whether she alone was to be out of it—whether she alone, quickly becoming so desperate that the choice seemed to lie between blabbing by silences and making the betrayal by words, might not at any rate have the fun and excitement of the bravado. Something impish stirred within her. If Bunny wanted it he could have it. She would at least surprise somebody : and that her private satisfaction at the perilous predicament in which she deliberately placed herself should be the greater, she sought a casual and off-handed tone.

"We shall miss poor Lionel this Feast," she remarked calmly. . . .

It was delicious. She positively tingled with the hardihood of it. It was an exquisite mocking of herself, and the joy of the sensation was deficient only in her ignorance of whether Bunny also knew he was mocked. If his gift of the safety-pin had meant what it might quite well have meant, he was mocked very prettily ; if, on the other hand, the pin had been innocently given, he was perhaps none the less mocked that he didn't know it. Which *had* he meant by giving her the pin ? It was necessary to the fullness of her present enjoyment that she should know. Dared she venture a look at him ? . . . She did. A little to her dashing, it told her nothing.

And Bunny had heard a little, and guessed the rest, of the state of affairs at Undershaws ; and quite special information he possessed assured him only too well that what others might set down as a discomfort and an irritation she must feel as a hideous torture. His heart was very full, but he contrived to make his question laconic enough :

"Mrs. Finch-Ommaney ? " he asked significantly. . . .

Berice gave a hard laugh.

"Oh, as much as you like ! . . . And when I want to vary it a little I can come to your friend, Mr. Neill—or to you."

Bunny looked quickly at her ; she was too ready with her accusation. "I haven't mentioned his name," he grunted.

She laughed.

"No, you haven't. . . . Why haven't you, by the way ? "

He made no reply. Bunny was wondering about Berice's magnificence. For he, too, remembered the pin, and ached to know whether in accepting it, she had accepted also the intimation, the acknowledgment, the warning that had gone with it. *Did* she know how much he knew ? *Had* the gift of the pin indeed been sufficiently significant, and, if it had not, or even if she chose to consider that it had not, was she merely playing on his uncertainty ? Was she pitting her own slight cleverness against his doggedness, and trying, while admitting no knowledge herself, to force admissions

from him? Or was the mask he suspected her to be wearing in truth no mask at all, and *had* the pin been so empty of meaning to her, so unrelated to other facts in her memory, that her heart would momentarily have stopped beating at the bare suspicion that he knew anything at all? . . . There was colour for this last surmise; Bunny could not see how otherwise she could have *dared* to attempt to delude him. . . .

Bunny passed his hand over his brow; he was wretched, wretched. Suppose that she really knew in her heart that he knew; why, oh, why, in that case, should she take the trouble to pretend to him? What satisfaction could that afford her? No, the hypothesis that she knew he knew would hardly bear examination. The message of the pin had failed after all. It was far more likely that she was merely trying to deceive him on the original fact, as in some form or another she had deceived Neill, as Bunny himself had not hesitated, for her sake, to deceive Neill. . . . (But Neill had had to be deceived though the rocks of Judgment Day had fallen on Bunny's head.) . . . Oh, how gladly, would she but speak the four words that would clear away this horrible mist of machination, would Bunny have sunk everything, snatched her away out of it all, and asked her to marry him within a month!

And all that stood in the way was her refusal to tell him something he already knew, with the suspicion always over her head that she would have told him only *after* she knew he knew! No offer of marriage was possible on those terms. The best thing he could do would be to put it out of his head at once. . . . Bunny groaned, and immediately cleared his throat noisily to cover the groan.

Presently he made another half-hearted attempt to pluck her secret from her.

"How did you get on with Neill?" he asked.

Berice answered lightly. "Oh, we talked—and drank tea——"

"You seem to have made him admire you."

"Really?"

"Yes. I think you struck him as being very fine."

"That's very gratifying," Berice remarked carelessly.

"You—you gave him that impression," Bunny said again, his heart thumping within him.

"Well? . . . You speak as if you were making an accusation."

"I—I——" Bunny began, and then again gave it up. "Well, I hope he didn't worry you," he ran down. But his whole nature yearned that she *should* be worried, tortured, brought to extremity, if by those means she might but escape free and be rid for ever of the horror that, he knew, would cease only when she ceased to hold her neck so stiffly and no longer out-fronted her error with a brow of brass.

But she took him up maliciously.

"Worry me?" she queried with affected surprise. "Oh, dear, no! Whatever should he worry me about?"

"Well," Bunny faltered, "I mean—I mean if he did—if he had happened to worry you—it would have been my fault. I—I got him up here, and introduced him to you. What I mean is, that you'd have had to quarrel with me, you see, not with him——"

Berice gave him a stare. Behind its open blankness was busy calculation enough.

"How extraordinary you are!" she said coolly. "Now I remember it, that's twice you've mentioned quarrelling—now, and that morning on the terrace. They say speaking of love is making love; it seems to me that to talk so much about quarrelling is rather like quarrelling."

Bunny could hardly endure it. Suddenly he broke out passionately.

"Well, that would be better than this!" he cried.

"Better than what? . . ."

They had stopped in their walk. They stood looking at one another face to face across the unspoken thing again. Both knew, she was almost certain he knew, but he did not know that she knew he knew. . . .

There was no issue. For a moment they stood face to face, and then walked on again.

Suddenly, out of his love and misery and uncompromising beliefs, Bunny felt a slow resentment against her growing up within him. He, Bunny, would have been ashamed to be

believed in a falsity merely out of the trust and credulity of other people's hearts. He would have felt himself humbled had a friend had to lie for *him*. And the mere uselessness of it all appalled him. As if her kind could ever effectually conceal anything! She could keep neither her gladness at joyous things nor her wincing at sharp ones to herself. It was only a question of time and chance—he, too, saw it—before her fancied cleverness and headstrongness overshot themselves and took her life entirely out of her own hands. Fool that she was! Why, what did she suppose Life to be—a skittle game, with moves taken back, such as he played over the chess board with Neill—or a deadly, irrevocable game for keeps? Had she, he wondered, thought for a moment of these things, or was she rushing blindly on in the fancied possession of a power she hadn't got? What a fool she was! Even in loving her he hated her. . . .

The hedges were full of roses, with straggling flushes of honeysuckle against the sky. She was carelessly touching twigs and blossoms with her hand as she passed. She seemed to him just then a very picture of recklessness, buoyancy, vanity, self-confidence, folly, wilfulness, and instability. It goaded him. He did not know how alive she herself was to certain precarious aspects of her position; he saw only her madness and irresponsibility. He broke out wrathfully.

“I'll tell you one thing, Berice!” he cried. “You're not so clever as you think. There are far cleverer people than you in the world; and if I were you I'd keep clear of—well, clever men like Neill, for instance!”

Airily, laughingly, she chose not to understand. She apparently even played the comedy of appearing to hesitate on the verge of being shocked.

“Oh, Bunny! . . . Your friend! . . .”

Bunny flushed darkly at the mocking imputation. He scowled at her.

“You know very well I don't mean that! You know as well as I do how Murragh Neill is to be trusted—to the last inch! But I'm giving you good advice for all that——”

With a light wave of her hand she called his attention to the surrounding hills.

“ Oh, Bunny, the echoes—the Ridsdale echoes—you’re waking the echoes! . . . But tell me why I should keep away from—I was going to say from Mr. Neill, but I suppose you didn’t *exactly* say that—from men as clever as Mr. Neill, then? ”

“ For your own sake! ” cried Bunny wrathfully.

“ For my own sake? ”

“ Yes—unless you think that doesn’t matter! ”

“ How violent you are! ”

Her disconcerting comment, not on the matter, but on the manner of Bunny’s speech, drove him by excess of indignation to silence again. Again her hand toyed with the flowers as she passed. She was wondering which of the several rods she had in pickle for this surly and meddlesome companion she could with most profit to herself apply to his back at this moment.

Suddenly she found one that would serve admirably. She turned to Bunny again with a deliberately winsome smile.

“ This is all very incomprehensible, Bunny,” she remarked, “ and I’m not going to try to understand it. But tell me one thing. A moment ago you spoke of quarrelling; well, answer me a question. Do you or do you not think, if a friendship’s to be kept, that it’s necessary to be always digging about roots (let me put it that way) and bringing to light whatever you may happen to find there? *Is that necessary?* Or don’t you think on the whole that it’s simpler and easier, and perhaps fairer too, to take your friends as they are? ”

At this point the unsuspecting Bunny opened his mouth, closed it, opened it again, but found not a word to say. Berice continued:

“ And if all this *isn’t* necessary, doesn’t friendship become a sort of compromise—a ‘ hollow compromise,’ I’ve no doubt you’ll call it, but at any rate a decent one? Haven’t most folk got—roots and crawling things, let us say—of their own, without bothering too much about those of their neighbours? ”

The stricken Bunny could only groan. “ God knows I have! ”
At that she turned on him like a flash.

“Oh! . . . You *do* know what I mean, then! You *do* make an admission! There *is* some private trowelling of my own you're so good as to offer to give me a hand with! Perhaps, now that you've admitted so much, you'll say a little more? Or is it too bad to speak of? . . .”

Bunny stood, abashed and interdicted. He had not her nimbleness, and all was now merely a worse muddle to him than ever. Surmises crowded one on another in his brain more quickly than his intelligence could grasp and examine them. He saw that he had made a tacit admission, on which she had swiftly seized; had she also, by that swift seizing, admitted anything? Had she deliberately laid that pitfall for him, and if so, from what secret fear? “Perhaps you'll say a little more . . . or is it too bad to speak of?” Was that a quintessential impudence, or had she *still* not the faintest idea that Lionel Finch-Ommaney had not been the very pattern of discretion and watchfulness and secrecy? . . . No: the gift of the pin must have failed of its purpose. Had it not been so there would have been no point in this useless effrontery. She must, *must* be back at the original fact, concealing that from him, who knew all about it! . . . But why, in that case, her own tacit admission, that there was anything to “trowel” about? . . . Bunny took his head between his hands. He could only think of one thing she might have meant by her reminder that we all have “roots and crawling things” of our own—the generality, always more humiliating to the recipient than to the speaker, that without charity and forbearance life is hardly livable at all. It came a little oddly—it is not the one who stands most in need of the charity who commonly urges it—but it was the nearest Bunny could get. . . . He concluded that she did *not* know he knew.

But he saw also that it had come to an open breach between Berice and himself. She stood, haughty and beautiful against the honeysuckle and roses, looking down on him.

“Have you anything else to say?” she asked icily.

“No,” he mumbled, three parts convinced that he himself was entirely in the wrong and she in the right to tell him to mind his own business.

“No? . . . Then since our walk hasn't been entirely a success I'll finish it alone, if you don't mind. . . .”

Was it Bunny's fault? He vowed it was not. He had done his best, but it was still stalemate—always stalemate.

But it was not stalemate to Berice. She knew now what she had only suspected before—that Bunny knew; and it was part of the swiftly advancing wildness and elasticity of her spirit that on no account whatever would she now let Bunny know that she knew he knew.

XII

FOR she considered that she had already paid whatever might justly be demanded of her, and paid in full. She herself had condemned herself, passed sentence, magnanimously making it heavy rather than light, and had worked out her self-imposed purgation; *ergo*, she argued, the matter was effaced. To judgment that became a persecution she did not intend to submit. Anything proportionable was only right; but beyond that . . . well, there is not one of us but consents to be arraigned only on the condition that, while offender, he has also power of revision over the sentence.

And, since it is the law that every action has its corresponding reaction, equal in intensity and opposite in direction, her wilfulness became comparable only to her former submission. Rapidly she began to write off outstanding obligations. At the mere thought that in another fortnight she would have done with Undershaws her bosom rose more lightly. Mrs. Finch-Ommaney might continue to feed on the yesterday's manna of her grief; Berice was now past her dismal apogee, stood away on the outward journey again, and had an interest in other things.

And she felt that she had neglected these other things for too long. Love, after all, is not the only thing in Life. True, she had not had love—she knew that—but many brave women miss it and do not spend the rest of their lives in repining for it. Berice was conscious of bravery. Gaiety, friendship, books, knowledge, travel—these were things to be bravely sought. She had lost much time, but there was one thing she had not lost—the belief that if only she desired things ardently enough she would get them by the mere

force of her desire. She had not been in love ; she had only been in love with Love ; and, that past, she had now fallen in love with Life.

The Feast that year fell opportunely with her altered mood. The fair field was a bustle, and the throb and jollity in the air could be felt rather than heard a couple of miles up the Dale. There was a brass band competition, in which eight or nine bands were engaged, and over and over again the "arrangement" of *William Tell* was played to the judge who sat sequestered and jealously guarded in his little tent. The way in which this band or the other had "takken" a particular passage was the subject of nightly debate in the "Cotterdale Arms" ; and the ever-repeated piece seemed to Berice to call without ceasing, "Life, Life, Life !" On a level stretch down by the river they raced horses and ponies ; there was a great roundabout with a steam organ ; the rising and falling of rows of swing-boats interposed ceaselessly between the eye and the skyline of the grey Fell ; and the cracks from a miniature rifle range sounded without intermission.

On the first afternoon of the Feast Everard Beckwith and Emney had come down from Skirethorns to see the sports, and they stood laughing and talking with Neill, Bunny, and Sir John Hartopp. Bunny's careful avoidance of Berice was superfluous ; she scarcely gave him a glance ; and he refused to be dragged from the outskirts of the group that was gathered about the space that had been cleared for the throwing of the cricket ball.

Berice remembered afterwards her slight surprise that Emney should have taken a hand in this event. She did not know why she should have been surprised ; all she knew at the time was that he was not the kind of man she would have associated with any form of athleticism. But take a hand he did. The Cotterdale lads are good throwers, by reason of their constant practice at a crag on the Arndale road, which seems easy to hit with a stone, but is actually ninety yards or so from the road ; and it was after these had made their attempts that Emney turned to Everard Beckwith.

“Are you any good at this?” he asked.

“Not now,” said Everard, smiling. “Some years ago, perhaps. . . .”

Jim Bright had the ball, which had just been returned from the other end. “Will ye have a try, Mr. Emney?” he said.

“You ought to give me a handicap for my age—but yes, I’ll have a shot,” Emney said.

He took off his coat, turned back his cuffs from his bony wrists, and advanced to the mark. Half the field had come running up, and a whispered jocularities or two had gone round. Then Emney threw. The spot that the ball next touched after leaving his hand was the ground a hundred yards and more away.

“Brayvos!” and cries of “Good throw!” went up. The ball was returned, and Emney, taking it again, prepared to throw it into the air.

“Five shillings for whoever catches this!” he cried. . . .

The ball flew up until it became very tiny against the blue. Jim Bright stood under it, looking up. . . .

“Oh, well caught, Jim!” Emney cried, as the ball descended like a bullet into Jim’s hands. “Jolly well caught!”

He bore his honours lightly. He was putting on his coat again. Berice, who had seen him throw, did not know that a man not otherwise conspicuous for strength and skill sometimes has the knack of the ball; but, for some reason she could not have defined, she was glad that Emney had done well. For one thing, he had outdistanced Bunny Hartopp’s throw by yards; for another, he had shown the people of this Cotterdale from which she ardently longed to break away that even in so small a matter as throwing a ball they are not the only folk in the world; and it did not occur to her that before entering the contest Emney might just possibly have counted the chances of his being able to excel in it. She was so pleased at his success that, finding herself at his elbow, she complimented him; they had always looked on Jim Bright as their best thrower, she said. . . . He accepted the compliment with a quite simple laugh of pleasure; she moved away with Sir John

Hartopp to watch the jumping ; and Emney made no attempt to attach himself to them. . . .

When next they met, half an hour later, near a brazen eruption of *William Tell*, it was she who sought his company. To tell the truth, she had lately had more than one misgiving whether, the urgency notwithstanding, she must not have seemed rather gratuitously abrupt on a certain recent occasion which he no doubt remembered very well ; and though that subject could not be raised again, there were other ways in which her harshness might be a little ameliorated. Soon after their visit to the mill he had lent her the two books of which he had spoken that morning ; she had not yet found time to look at them ; but it would at least be graceful to mention them. She did so.

“ The *Aubade* and the *Gestes Paresseuses* ? ” he said. “ Please keep them as long as you like. I can quite understand from what your uncle has told me that you’ve not had much time for reading. I don’t know Mrs. Finch-Ommaney, but that’s no reason for not hoping she’s better ? ”

She forgot that there was an implication in the fact that she should notice what, after all, it would have been distasteful to call an improvement in him ; or perhaps she forgot that the changes we attribute to other people are frequently changes that have taken place in ourselves. She certainly liked him far better than she had supposed she ever would, and, so long as it was plainly understood that no recurrence to one subject was to be permitted, there were other grounds on which she would meet him gladly. She gave him a smile and a nod.

“ I’ll tell her you asked,” she said.

“ She won’t mind that ? . . . ”

He really meant the question. Somehow it seemed an admission, and one not altogether without natural dignity, that he, too, was not unconscious of the things she had noticed in him on that morning when he had sat by her side on the boulder near the mountain stream. It was exceedingly delicate and difficult, and the mere naming of the thing that was in her mind was destructive of that thing. He seemed to trust her to take his full meaning, and in such a way that,

without doing an impossible thing, she could not but honour his trust. It was, at any rate, far pleasanter to do so ; and it occurred to her, a little late perhaps, that, whatever it was in him she had at first a little wondered at, he probably was, in spite of all, immeasurably her superior in knowledge of that Life which now so irresistibly called her. And there is more than one kind of man in the world, after all.

“ I’m sure she won’t,” she replied. . . . “ But it is rather difficult to talk with a bombardon at your ear——”

He felt it to be an invitation ; she had moved ; and they walked away together, pleasantly chatting. Tea-time drew near ; their party came together again near the donkey races ; and a proposal was made that they should return to Skirethorns for tea. Berice could have made her attendance on Mrs. Finch-Ommaney an excuse for not accepting ; she hesitated for a moment ; and then suddenly she accepted. The car was waiting, and they got into it. Bunny only remained behind. It did not by any means displease Berice that Bunny should sulk. If he cared to take his enjoyment in that way, very well : when he had learned to respect people’s privacies, and to recognize that a just self-punishment does not invoke the bearing of the old burden for ever, then perhaps she would have something to say to him. . . .

They reached Skirethorns, and took tea on the terrace. It was a heavenly evening, warm and cloudless, and from the fair field a mile and a half away the strains of *William Tell* floated lightly up the Dale. They lingered over the fragments of their repast, the men contentedly drawing at their pipes and cigars ; and Everard Beckwith referred again to that throw of Emney’s.

“ If you catch as well as you throw you must have been an uncommonly good out-field,” he remarked. “ You’ve evidently played cricket.”

“ That was my place, of course,” Emney replied ; and for a quarter of an hour they talked cricket, Emney showing an unexpected knowledge of the state of the county championship. . . . “ But I could never afford very much time for it,” their host concluded. “ I’ve had to work far too hard. I’ve been in business since I was sixteen, and if you know any-

thing about modern business you'll understand that I've had to take my cricket as I could get it."

"You have to specialize, of course," said Everard sagely; "no doubt about that; even my own little homespun attempt told me that. . . ."

The claims on a man's time of sport, business, and jackets occupied them for another quarter of an hour, and then Emney said:

"What are you doing about dinner, Hartopp? Can you stay? I don't know what I can offer you, I'm sure; everybody's down at the field there; but there'll be cold stuff, if you can put up with that——"

"No better over at my place. . . . Thanks," Sir John replied. "Will that suit you, Neill?"

"Admirably," said Neill.

"Right," said Emney, and then he turned to Berice. He smiled. "We could run you over in the car in twenty minutes any time," he reminded her.

She hesitated again, wondering about Mrs. Finch-Ommaney.

"Better fiddle the tune out," Sir John twinkled from behind his cigar.

"Very well. Thank you," said Berice. "But please don't keep me too late. . . ."

The pleasant, idle talk was resumed.

Berice enjoyed the evening thoroughly, and without a second thought as to why she did so. She needed some such interlude. She so contrived matters that it was not noticeable that she said little to Neill, whom for vague enough reasons she set with Bunny in the shades of uncordial thought: and the strolling off together of Everard and Sir John Hartopp, presently followed by Neill, left her and Harrison Emney alone. Any lurking fear she might have had that he would put a strain upon the opportunity was at once dispelled by the cheerfulness of his proposal that they should go and see the "old crockery" of which he had spoken during the earlier days of his installation. They went indoors to see it.

It stood in the drawing-room; it was choice Sèvres; and he made no pretence that he did not know its worth. "They're all good pieces," he said, "and this, in the next cabinet, is by

Riesener, Louis the Sixteenth's *ébéniste*, an admirable specimen, to my way of thinking. . . ." He opened cases, drew aside silk curtains, and put pieces into her hands; and he promised to show her after dinner his collection of Keigwyn's pastels. The others returned from their stroll, and Neill, rashly questioning Emney's assignation of some ivory or other, was overwhelmed with evidence and had laughingly to confess himself worsted. They dined, sitting long over the scratch meal, laughing and talking; they sat so long that the candles had to be brought in before they had finished; and then they adjourned to the terrace, where they talked again, in the soft and delicate interplay of the lighted candles in the room and the clear twilight outside. A faint glow in the sky marked the position of the fair field, and the band was now playing for dancing on the grass.

It was not until half-past nine that Berice rose to take her leave. "I'm afraid the pastels must wait till another time," she said.

"I shall have to drive you back myself—Edwards is down with the rest of them at the fair," Emney said, with the first faint embarrassment that had shown in his manner.

She merely feared that she was putting him to a great deal of trouble. . . . He even, when the car was brought to the door, made the slightest imaginable indication that if she preferred it she might take her place in the tonneau; but "I shall have to show you the way," she said as she took her place by his side. They left; she waved her hand to her uncle; and he allowed her to dismount and open the gate half a mile lower down. She mounted again, and they took the road.

Since their last meeting he had got himself very well in hand: he intended to make no mistakes now: and he merely resumed their tea-time conversation. He talked without removing his eyes from the flying lamplit road.

"What I told your uncle about the cricket was merely a plain statement of the case," he said, as they rushed past trees and hedges. "As he says, you must specialize nowadays, if you're going to do anything. I've had to specialize in my own business, of course. . . . And my task's been in a

sense doubly hard," he explained, giving the wheel a turn. "You see, I made up my mind quite at the beginning that although I was pitched into business I didn't intend to get the money mania. I'd seen too many men who'd promised themselves they'd retire from business at a certain age and then found they couldn't do so—no other interest to occupy them, you see. I'd seen them on business days, hanging round the same old places, talking the same old talk, for sheer lack of anything else to do. I used to think what fools they were until I saw that they'd simply made their beds and had got to lie on them—(shall I put speed on?)—and then I made up my mind that *I* wasn't going to have that kind of bed. So I began to look about for a hobby. . . . But I'm boring you."

"Indeed you're not," Berice replied, her eyes on the rushing hedges.

"Well, tell me when I am. . . . So I deliberately safeguarded myself against that. I saw it didn't very much matter what I took up so long as it took my mind away from the things that filled it during the working time, and I think I've a natural taste for pictures and all the things I was showing you. So I indulged that. The result is, that I have interests that begin where those of other men in my position finish; and the odd thing is that I don't think the business suffers in the slightest. . . . Frankly, I regard it as the cleverest thing I ever did."

"Yes," said Berice, half interested, and half wishing she had written him the letter of thanks she had spoken of when he had met her on the moor. He had, after all, known nothing of the inner agitation that had determined her abruptness. . . . Emney continued:

"You see, my father was an English schoolmaster in Lanarkshire, and I received the greater part of my education from him before I was seventeen. What's commonly called education, that is; but it was my dear old mother who gave me my real education. She was Scotch, one of those Scotchwomen who live only to 'get their sons on,' as they call it. She denied herself simply everything that I might have my chance. *You* mightn't call it much of a

chance, Miss Beckwith, but it was mine, and I owed it to her. . . ." He paused: it was plain that he had adored his mother: and a light sigh had escaped him before he resumed. "She put me into a bank when the few extra shillings I could have made at something else meant merely bread-and-butter to us—she said she could rub along. And—and . . . well, by the time I'd become head cashier it didn't matter very much."

He was silent for some minutes, his eyes on the rushing road, his hands ceaselessly busy with the wheel. Berice gathered that the reason it hadn't very much mattered had been that his mother had died, and she truly believed that for the moment he had forgotten her presence. . . . Presently he resumed.

"Yes, that gave me my chance. . . . And if I'd to make money again I think I should go the same way about it. That was my mother's idea, too, canny body. 'Leave the things alone that are worth the while of the big operators, Harry,' she always said; and I put my small savings afterwards into little proprietary businesses that nobody else bothered about. No artificially rigged markets then. (But don't think I'd ever have had anything to do with that mill of your uncle's, Miss Beckwith!) It was slow, but sure, and I saved money. . . . Then I became London manager, and after that I was taken into partnership. . . ."

Again he paused, but this time not for long. He gave a little cheerful laugh. "It was then that I'd time to look about me and to see what I could do with my life—for this other was simply a means, you see. There were all sorts of other things. There was travel, certain tastes I could gratify if I wanted, and perhaps even to some extent I could choose the company I preferred—these things were what I really meant by Life, you see. . . . And——" but here he stopped abruptly. Perhaps he was thinking of the sweetest companionship of all it had been—was now—in his power to choose. . . .

"Yes," said Berice absently. . . .

"And now I can actually give myself a good many of these things. Mind you, I don't say it's all been my own

excellent contrivance. I dare say I've been lucky too. I know better men who haven't come off so well, poor chaps. For all that, I can cut loose and begin to live my own life to-morrow if I like. . . ."

It would have been difficult to say, and Berice, now busily making small half-contrite admissions on his behalf, was too occupied with her own thoughts even to think it, that he was insisting a little on his freedom and the things he had both opportunity and power to do. Since there was not a word that he said that was not simple and honest and true, he had every right to speak as he did. If his story stood his friend, so much the luckier he. Of his mother he spoke with a gentleness and affection that it would have taken a harder heart than Berice's to withstand, and the wonder, after all, was that out of so little he had made so much. He was at any rate a man of to-day. He had grasped the conditions of his age, and had actually made a success of things her uncle had only made himself gently ridiculous about. Had she known these things before they might not necessarily have altered her final estimate of him, but at least that estimate would have been better based: which, she reflected, was as much as to say that if she was right she was so by sheer luck again. . . . She mused. . . .

"It's all very new to me," she murmured. "It's all so—so very different from anything I've—that's happened to me——"

"Yes." He spoke the monosyllable with a sudden lowering of his voice, and was then suddenly silent. When presently he spoke again it was timidly and haltingly.

"Different; yes. . . . Yes, I've no doubt it's been different; of course; one can see that. . . . I wonder if I dare. . . ."

He stopped again. She gave him a minute, and then asked what—perhaps already half knowing what his answer would be.

He gave a short laugh, however.

"Oh, I don't know! it's a silly thing after all. It doesn't matter. Besides, I imagine you know already. I told you some of it this afternoon, for that matter. . . ."

For fear lest her surmise might be right she was silent.

But not so he for long. Though he could not account for it, was ignorant of the weight that had oppressed her spirit and of the headstrongness and resolution with which she now appeared to be throwing it off, he could not but be conscious that she was no longer quite the same woman who had thoughtlessly taken up a word of his that morning by the boulder. And the distance between them seemed to him to have diminished still further since, that afternoon on the moor, she had almost fled from him at the single word 'marriage.' They got on better altogether now. . . . He resumed slowly and brokenly, his attention apparently equally divided between his own words and the acetylene-lighted road along which they were dashing.

"Yes, I told you some of it this afternoon. I've told you more now. . . . Naturally, a good many things *have* been denied me, things in a sense I've a natural right to. . . . Some people call them trifling things, but I don't; they're tremendously important. They often make all the difference; time and time again I've seen it. It's as if . . . well, I dare say you'll understand that I can see at a glance what it is about a picture or a porcelain that stamps it. . . . Believe me, it is so. . . ."

For the first time during their drive she felt uncomfortable. Her surmise had been right, and she knew what he meant. . . . But—but—if he was really conscious of certain things—certain absences, perhaps—in himself, and in his heart lamented them, why give them renewed existence by speaking of them? He was not quite the man she had supposed him to be, perhaps—and yet he was much the same really—

And she thought she saw now whither all his talk had been quietly tending. . . .

She made an awkward remark about the running of the car. He shook his head quickly, then, apparently changing his mind, he accepted her leading.

"Well, I asked you to tell me when I bored you," he remarked. . . .

And, though Berice felt sure that he would not do so on the present occasion, she remembered again his announcement that he intended to return to the subject she had so

peremptorily forbidden that afternoon on the moor. He was tenacious, and, though his tongue gave it no present utterance, it was in his mind now. She was conscious, too, that he had got nearer to the root of the whole matter. If the raising of the question he had just dropped had meant anything at all, it had meant that he threw himself in certain things on her mercy; and though people did not commonly throw themselves on Berice Beckwith's mercy in vain, that must remain, for the present at any rate, beside the mark. Practically, of course, that *could* not be allowed to make any difference . . . but the fact remained that many things were now modified both in herself and in him, and that he now appeared as being in some respects a strong, keen, capable man, and one whom she could no longer class and have done with without a more searching overhauling of things within her own breast than she had yet undertaken. Nor was she at present disposed to make such an overhauling. Rather than do so, and have so much of Life's sediment stirred up again, she would accept a good many things in no matter whom without question, and would waive a good many superiorities, real or fancied, in herself. If he had found the right way with her—she was not blind to this possible aspect of the question—well, once more, so much the better for him if he could convince her that he had. She was there to be convinced, and perhaps the readier that she thought his chance, after all, but small. These things, too, belonged to the Life with which she was newly in love. The living was the thing. Life included inequalities, discrepancies, imperfections, shortcomings without number, and to refuse to meet and treat with these would be to limit Life. She was for adventures and coming out into the open. If risks were run and forfeits known, both risks and forfeits must be accepted. It took at least two people to live a life, and the other party, this man whose hands moved on the steering-wheel or whoever, ran risks and was to be cast in penalties also. If it should come to that, well, let it come; ten to one she would have to refuse him: let him look after himself, as she would take care of *herself*. . . .

She sat by his side in the car, defiant, confident, conscious

of her own every fibre, conscious of him, and almost ready to cry out with her intense consciousness of that Life that seemed to beckon smilingly to her from afar.

The silence that had fallen on the pair of them lasted for the rest of the journey. When, setting her down at Under-shaws, he broke it, it was merely to say that he was glad she had been able to join their little impromptu picnic and to bid her good night. He left. She went straight to her room. Pleasurable sensations of excitement occupied her as she undressed; they accompanied her to her pillow; and in the steady tingling of them she slept immediately. Twice during the night she awoke, each time to recognize with a little thrill that the haggard old burden was still unimposed upon her; and as long as that was withheld, the mere continuance of living was a delight.

XIII

SHE awoke in the same lovely fallacy of mood. Her bedroom window stood wide open, and the curtains floated into the room on the morning breeze. She got out of bed and stood barefooted at the window. The lily garden below was a light smoking of drying dew; the air thrilled with the singing of birds; and the farmyard cocks called rousingly up and down the Dale. She drew a deep breath, and then crossed humming to the dressing-table. Among the objects of leather and silver and crystal that littered it lay a couple of books. They were the books Emney had lent her. She opened one of them at random, and her eyes read on as she dressed her hair. It was the *Aubade* of Bartholomew, and presently she turned the page and continued to read as her hand felt for brushes. . . .

Oiselette, Fierabras, Garde Joyeuse . . . the jewelled names seemed to sparkle and flash on the page as the dew on the petals outside shot its tiny rays of amber and emerald and rose. She laughed a little, and laughed at herself for laughing. If these gay and irrepressible longings of the spirit were an illusion, so doubtless had her heavy hours been; illusion, too, was in its way a fact, and the only fact that mattered on this brilliant morning. She nodded, as it were, health and long life to illusion, finished her dressing, and went downstairs to breakfast singing.

All the forenoon the joyous possession lasted. In its dominance over her heart Mrs. Finch-Ommaney ceased to be trying, and Berice to be tried. At midday the distant throbbing of music began again in the fair field, and again it seemed to cry to Berice, "Life, Life, Life!" She was walking with Mrs. Finch-Ommaney in the garden when the music

began again: her foot beat in time to it; and when Mrs. Finch-Ommaney, glancing covertly at her and then dropping her dark-fringed lids, murmured, "Won't you go to the Feast again, Berice darling? I'm sure you need the change," she blithely took the words in a manner she knew not to be meant.

'Yes, if you think you can spare me,' she replied. . . .

Three o'clock found her in the fair field once more. She had walked there. Almost the first person she met was Emney, alone; he had come down to ask the judge of the brazen strife of *William Tell* to have tea and early dinner at Skirethorns before taking train home again. This had been a custom of Everard Beckwith's, and apparently Emney wished it to continue. He said so as he and Berice passed behind the gaudy striped sheeting of a cocoanut-shy which flapped and rippled in the breeze.

"He's an organist from one of the West Riding towns, and his heart and soul are in his work," Emney said. "I should have appreciated the attention if it had been shown to *me* at one time. I like to help a man who likes the things I like—I suppose we all do. There's Bartholomew, for instance, who wrote the *Aubade*. I found him in the Poet's Corner of some local newspaper or other, and he was pretty well at his last gasp. I paid for the publication of his first book of poems, and he hasn't looked behind him since. I'm proud of that.—And Keigwyn, too, I dug out of a shabby studio in Chelsea.—Yes, I like doing it."

"I glanced at the *Aubade* this morning," said Berice.

"Then you may glance at—to all intents and purposes—its publisher in me," he laughed.

She, too, laughed. "I hope you're omniscient, if you stand as a kind of omnipotence to these people."

"Oh, I think that's all right," he replied. "Perhaps Keigwyn isn't exactly the kind of man you make a personal friend of, but Bartholomew's all right.—How do you like the *Aubade*? Do you think I was justified? . . ."

They continued to walk and talk. Presently they had come to the wall of the fair field, and were at the foot of the path that led up the Fell. Berice had not escaped from

Undershaws for the purpose of going immediately back again ; and she wanted to see the whole of the fair at once from a little way up the Fell. He followed at her heels. In a few minutes the fair ground was below them, a mass of men and women ever moving yet ever remaining in the same place, like the globules of midges one sees in the air of a summer's evening. The rising and falling of the swing-boats was foreshortened ; the babble of cries and shots and trumpets had diminished ; and their own voices sounded more loudly when they spoke. The path, which had been narrow, presently allowed them to walk side by side again ; they followed it to a point beyond which they would have had to scramble over boulders ; and Berice selected a gentle slope of grass and sat down. He stretched himself by her side.

As he did so, it was with the foreknowledge that before they rose to their feet again he would once more have said that for which he would now hardly find a more likely opportunity. He did not know the precise date of her and her uncle's departure, but he knew that it was imminent. Did he allow her to leave with the thing he had to say unsaid he would be false to that urging that had kept him wakeful during the whole of the previous night and during the greater part of nights before that ; and it seemed to him that his slow and carefully planned career would miss of its finest fruition.

For during years of struggling he had ever dreamed of that brighter crown and fulfilment than any he had spoken of during their drive the evening before. Those possessions the delight in which he had so solicitously fostered were in themselves no more than a setting for this possession more precious still. Perhaps the fewness of women in his life had made him accessible to impossible hopes, had filled him with unrealizable desires ; but he thought he had found her in whose hands it lay to fulfil or to falsify all, and he was prepared to abide by the throw. And any risk that might attend his seizure of the present occasion he must accept or else lose his chance for ever.

"Do you yet know when you are leaving ?" he asked, after a long silence.

She replied, in ten days at the latest. She, too, had been conscious of the quality of that protracted silence.

“Ten days . . .” he repeated musingly; and, as on that former morning by the boulder above the mountain stream, began to bore at the bents with the point of his stick. “Ten days. . . .”

She knew now what was coming, and that its coming must not find her unready. She now sought to secure a firm hold on herself.

The last time Emney had approached the subject he was now obviously about to approach again, she had hardly heard six words before there had sprung up before her eyes a spectre that had prohibited her from listening one moment longer. Long, long ago, she had told herself plainly that, save on an inflexible condition, she could not marry any man; and that such a condition should exist at all had determined the answer she had had to give to Emney. What had happened to modify that condition that the question she knew was coming and the answer she supposed she must still give showed in a different light now? She strove to get such a comprehensive view of the events of the last few days as she had of the bustling fair field below. . . .

By dint of application, and a little forcing of the perspective, she began to see more clearly. The condition was still there . . . but it *was* a condition, not a complete forbiddance—that was to say, it was something to be envisaged, weighed, and then embraced or refused as this consideration or that should finally preponderate. The mere thought of telling Emney what she must tell him was *not* now a thing to be instantly and for ever banished from her mind as an utter impossibility. It was not an utter impossibility, and as a possibility it was something to be examined if she was to prove herself worthy of the adventurous Life for which she so panted. True, the memory of past fears still caused her to tremble, as a child trembles even when the boggy that has terrified him in the dark is stripped in broad daylight before his eyes; but her tremor was at the memory of the boggy, and not at the boggy. Fearfully, and already prepared to start back at its slightest movement, Berice examined her

bogy. It did not now instantly fasten itself tooth and talon upon her. In her new gaiety and wilfulness she found strength to resist it. She looked at it again more boldly, and again more boldly still; and its turnip head and end of guttered candle seemed to show. The sun shone brightly; her heart was swelled with hope; and the thing that for so long had ridden her seemed to show plainly at last for what it was—mere rag and broomstick, leering out of the twilight of the past. . . . Such as it was, of course, rag and broomstick, it was still there; but she had no intention of relighting its candle in order to prove to herself that she was still capable of a shudder.

Then she began to see more clearly still. Between her present state and the state she must be in before she could accept the man at her side (always supposing she desired to accept him—a desire to be examined presently did she decide that it was worth while to examine it)—between these two states a condition stood; but that condition was not, so to speak, the original thing, but the making known of that thing. The thing once made known, the condition would be fulfilled. It was less her heart than her confidence that she had refused him that afternoon on the moor. And that had been natural. Their acquaintance had not been such as to warrant, even in return for the honour he did her, such a confidence. He had not come close enough to her even, so to speak, to be refused.—But things were different now. She did not know that she was accounting as a great change in him what was only a possession, and a transitory one, in herself. She only knew that the gulf that had seemed to lie between them did *not* now appear so impassable that it was not worth while to consider whether, should bridging seem desirable, it was not possible to bridge it. What favour he found, had he but known it, was but a consequence of her flinging off of that ancient spectre from the plaguing of which she was granted a temporary release.

He had not ceased to bore in the grass with his stick. He now stopped, and spoke again.

“Do you remember”—she knew it was upon her before he had finished, saying ‘Do you remember’—“Do you

remember what I said one afternoon not long ago—perhaps you've forgotten it, but I haven't—something that I said I—I should do——?” His tone was very quiet.

“Yes,” she replied as quietly as he.

“You know what I mean? That there was something I should ask you again?” . . .

“Yes.”

“Well, I must say it again now. I can only hope that your reply won't be the same. I'd have waited, but there's so little time left. Ten days. . . . I love you,” he continued earnestly and awkwardly as a boy. “I know that's no reason why you should love me, but I should be prouder than of anything I've ever done or been if you did. Perhaps I oughtn't to say it, but I think you *do* know me a little better now—I hope so. I don't mean that the longer you knew me the better you'd find me—I'm afraid there'd be heaps of shortcomings you'd discover; but I do mean that I'm not afraid of your finding out other things—I mean conduct and so on—about me. Believe me, that's all quite, quite clean. I'm not good enough for you; I never shall be; I know that, but I offer you all of myself, not a bit, and things kept back——”

Berice wondered that one at least of his halting phrases should, by virtue of the miracle that had happened to her, be robbed of the sting it would have had for her not long before. That it had no sting seemed an indication that her bogy was completely laid. There was no question of his sincerity, and the fleeting wonder she had had before, whether in allowing himself to be “known” he had deliberately ‘taken a line’ with her, vanished as quickly as it came. He was silent again, again prodding at the ground as he awaited her reply.

And now that, not the mere abstract possibility of a husband, but a tangible and individual lover, was presented to her, she was not quite ready after all to give that reply. She must have a little more time. Her eyes had wandered away over the noisy fair field and were looking down the Dale.

“Please don't speak for a little while,” she said, and began to think again.

She had already faced, tentatively and half-heartedly, certain preliminaries, of conditions and so forth, and was now face to face with the heart of the matter. And, now that she faced it, it came to her with a shock that the heart of the matter was after all of secondary importance. Did she love him? No; but then it was not quite a question of love. Love was not expressly excluded; it might even happen to become included: but it was not the beginning and end of the matter. In her new mood love seemed a petty and private thing by comparison with that greater, wider thing for which her whole being now cried aloud. Did she tell him so, that, she knew, would suit him well enough; Life he could already offer her, and love, he would doubtless say, would come hereafter; men were creatures of such confidence. . . . In the meantime, love remained the unknown quantity in the bargain.

The bargain? . . . The word struck her. Yes, it was a bargain. On the one hand was his attitude, whatever that might prove to be, when she had made her condition known; on the other—her eyes closed for a moment—on the other were leisure, larger interests, new scenes, peoples, tongues, manners . . . in a word, Life. All depended on the way in which he should receive her condition. . . .

Not for an instant did she think of flinching from that condition. No base temptation came near her. She did not know how she could make it known to him, but made known it must be. She could have asked for further time, a few days longer, for consideration, but it was not time that she wanted. It was rather knowledge of him. She wanted, before admitting him into the secret place of her life, to know how he would demean himself there. She did not know his point of view, and only from himself could she obtain it. How obtain it? Apparently it could be obtained only by taking the plunge. . . .

That she hesitated to take the plunge might in itself have warned her. Deeply and obscurely in herself she knew that there was only one way of telling him—she must tell him rawly and at once if ever she was to tell him at all. Not to tell him at all was frightful, inconceivable; but the other!

. . . To put herself so utterly in his power—to await with bowed head his decision—his condemnation, perhaps—his rejection! . . . No, she could not bring herself to that. The gladness of the day, the merry turmoil of the field below, the brave new ebullience of her spirits, all cried aloud to her that she was rid of her spectre—rid of it, rid of it! And, a free and unriden spirit, she could not so unconditionally trust this so curiously boyish, middle-aged suitor. Therefore, as one has seen lads, distrustful of one another, refuse in an exchange to relinquish their hold on the one thing until the other is safely within their grasp, so she sought to sound him while committing herself to nothing. She cast swiftly about for impossible compromises.

When at last she spoke it was without looking at him.

“I do feel that something—something has happened—I don’t know what it is—to change matters between us. They *are* somehow different—not so different as you think, perhaps——” she murmured, her fingers making little pleats of the stuff of her skirt.

“Ah,” he breathed ardently, “if you only knew how different you had made me——!”

She smoothed out the series of pleats, and began another series.

“I wasn’t thinking of that; or rather, I was thinking of *myself*. There are the two sides to the question. After all, you don’t know very much about *me*.”

“What I don’t know I’ll risk,” he said, with an adoring smile.

Again she pleated.

“But I might prefer that you didn’t risk anything. There might be something—as a matter of fact there *is* something—that I feel I ought to tell you.” She looked up, and smoothed the whole of the pleating away.

The adoring look had faded from his face. He had dropped his eyes to the ground again. His voice was slow and hesitating and serious.

“If you’ll forgive me for making a guess,” he said, “I think I already know what it is.”

She gave a little involuntary “Oh!” and turned to him,

but immediately looked away again. She wondered what he thought he knew.

"Shall I tell you?" he said.

"Yes."

"And may I even mention a name?" he asked diffidently.

"Yes."

"Lionel Finch-Ommaney? . . ."

She was not quick enough to smother another "Oh!" on her lips. It was as if the mere sound of the name, apart from its significance, had still a little power to sting. He continued quickly.

"I see I'm right. Well, so much the better. My knowing spares you the pain of having to tell me—for I can quite understand that it *would* be a pain——"

Her heart was thumping violently. She turned to him with a queer, painful little laugh.

"You mean that we——?"

"Yes," he said, with an odd precipitancy that was only to spare her the possible pain of having to complete the sentence. . . .

But she knew very well that he didn't know anything at all, and again she could hardly contain a smile. His construction of her relation with Lionel Finch-Ommaney might vary from Neill's in detail, but substantially, she knew, it would be the same. Her safety, too, would be the same, and doubtless he, like Neill, found her magnificent. . . .

She then, after many seconds, found herself asking in a low voice, "And don't you want to know more about it?"

"I don't want to know anything," he replied. From some impulse of untaught chivalry he refrained from looking at her.

She knew not what mingling of amusement and despair she found in it. "It makes no difference?" she said, knowing herself to be perfectly safe. . . .

"None."

"Truly?"

"Truly."

She might have prolonged the teasingly poignant pastime almost indefinitely, but suddenly he broke into low, rapid, passionate speech.

“ Oh, do let me tell you how *I* see it ! ” he implored. “ We have met each other late. Of course, your life wasn't at a standstill before I came into it, but don't tell me, don't, dear, what it has been—I only know, and I only want to know, that it's been beautiful. He's dead now ; that's all over ; and I offer you something else. If it hasn't the same sort of beauty—it can't have, I know—but perhaps it has another. Perhaps it has even a wider and larger one. You can't go on living in a kind of vestal dream however beautiful it is : if you try to you'll find it's like breathing the same air over and over again—it will get vitiated. You can't do that. If that lovely dream's gone, let me give you something else, something real. Keep all you have that's precious to you ; I'll never, never disturb it ; but give me—I won't even say give me love, but just a chance to love you and be loved ! Just a chance, Berice—just a chance——”

He had seized her hand that lay on the grass. He was shaken with emotion. She, too, was suddenly moved.

“ Oh, how can I—how can I ? ” she muttered agitatedly, more to herself than to him.

He answered for himself.

“ Ah, you can, you can ! Leave the past, dear ! You can't go forward looking behind you ; that's a dream—it might not ever have been fulfilled—and it isn't a dream that I'm offering you ! All I have at present, if I have that—if you're so good as to give me that—is companionship ; a little while ago I hadn't that ; perhaps in a little while I shall have more still—you don't know——”

She gave a foolish, bewildered laugh. “ More companionship ? ”

“ Ah, no—love—— ! ”

She looked at him ; there was worship in his face ; she looked away again. Against his adoration she could make no headway. . . .

Then it was as if a perverse imp within her suddenly raised its head, grinned, and said, “ You see how he regards you ; you can't, short of four stark words, shake his belief in you ; nay, even those words won't do it—try it—try it ! ” . . .

She obeyed the imp, and tried it.

"A moment ago," she said, carefully choosing her words, "you spoke of vestal dreams. I assure you, on my word, that that doesn't in the least apply to me."

He gave her another worshipping look. "Ah, you think so, because you've no knowledge of life—nothing to compare things with—believe me, you haven't!"

The imp within her smiled.

"I think—I'm sure—I know I have," she continued.

Emney merely laughed gently. . . .

"You think it's impossible that I should have?" she demanded.

"I should say quite impossible," he replied.

"And if I tell you again that you're wrong you'll still say that it's my inexperience that's talking?"

"I think you anticipate me pretty nearly. I shouldn't have used quite those words."

With a triumphant "What did I tell you?" the imp within her retired into the fastnesses of her heart again.

Her condition, that indispensable condition, was becoming harder to face with each moment that passed. The minutes, slipping by, enabled him to muster his reasons and to array them against her, and these reasons now had a fire and smoulder to which her opposition only added fuel. The same minutes, on the other hand, left her at the same standstill, incapable of saying anything without saying all, and still shrinking instinctively from that complete putting of herself into his power. . . .

And then suddenly she found herself wondering whether he himself quite understood why he wished to marry her. And this again was difficult and delicate. She was not sure whether he did. He said, of course, that he loved her; he said it in perfect good faith; but she wondered whether, under circumstances easily conceivable, another woman would not have served him equally well. These 'circumstances easily conceivable' she presented to herself allusively and by impalpable likenesses. She knew him to be, as it were, a climber, reaching out a hand upwards, counting all below as nothing; and she remembered how in climbing ascent was easier than descent. He had used the word

'vestal'; but his eyes, perhaps, were not solely fixed on the skyey glacier of her vestalship. He had told her his story, an honourable one; he had confessed that there were things he lacked which, in his own words, made all the difference; and he had allowed it to be inferred that he found these things in her. . . . As in some subterranean place of gloom a grey glimmer of light appears to the stumbler, so, far ahead and dimly seen, she began to discern a way out. . . .

She turned to him.

"Why do you want to do this—the whole thing—at all?" she asked frankly.

Fondness, and a little incomprehension, were in his look as he replied:

"Why? . . . But I've said that I love you!"

"Is that all?"

"*All—!*" But for the fondness, the incomprehension would have hurt him.

"I'll tell you why I ask," she continued. "It's as much for your sake as mine. I ask because it seems to me that anything there might be between us would be a good deal in the nature of a bargain."

"A bargain?" he echoed.

"Let me explain." She paused for a moment, and then continued resolutely. "Of course, there's one thing I cannot give you; you know that, and as I understand, you accept it—without knowing or asking very much about it, I can't help thinking. It seems to me that we attach quite different degrees of importance to it, and I tell you frankly that if I were in your place I should hesitate. But never mind that for the moment. As you say, it's past, and I think if I'd my life to live over again I'd—I'd give less—keep more."

He nodded. He had heard of the sentimental lingering women make over the memory of the first kiss . . . especially in this restricted Dale in which she had lived all her life it would seem a great thing. . . .

She continued.

"But let's get on.—I said a bargain; that's out of the bargain, then; and, of course, it's because it *is* out of it that it becomes a bargain. Very well; let's see what remains.

I have—what I have ; and you . . . but let me thank you for one thing before we go any further : you haven't mentioned the very obvious advantages to me."

" Oh ! " he interpolated deprecatingly, perhaps really hurt that she should think him capable of mentioning them.

" I'm sorry," she said rather hardly, " but you mustn't mind my putting things in this argumentative sort of way ; you'll see why I do it presently.—I know what I have to gain, then, but I still don't think *you* realize——"

He cut her short impetuously. " Oh, you overrate——" he began, with a quick gesture.

She cut him equally short. " The importance to you of my relation with Lionel Finch-Ommaney ? I do not ! "

" You do, you do—you do entirely ! That's past, past, I say ! Oh, how can I make you see ? You would see, you *would*, if only you would trust yourself to me. Tell me——"

But he broke off abruptly, as Berice put up her hand.

" No, you tell *me*," she commanded, in a slightly raised voice. " You tell *me*—what the things are you would demand in a wife."

" The things——? "

" Yes. Tell me."

" The things. . . . Why, what *does* one commonly 'demand in a wife' ? "

" Tell me."

" *Tell* you ? . . . Are you serious ? . . . Do you mean—catalogue them ? . . . "

" Yes, if you like."

He spoke with some amusement, but also with energy. " I'm afraid I don't quite see the joke . . . but never mind : here goes for the model wife.—I should demand such love as she could give me—I would respect privacies, of course, and should demand them myself—I should ask for obedience in such things as we both thought, or I thought, might affect our happiness—respect for my name and so on—and—and—I won't insult you by mentioning anything else. . . . Is that more than you could give ? "

Berice had begun the pleating of her frock again.

"No," she said slowly, "it is not more than I—*could* give."

His amusement had vanished.

"And I would give—everything—and such a love!—", he pleaded touchingly.

Well, she had it spread out before her now, almost complete. One more question, and then nothing remained for her but to make her choice. . . . With dropped head, and in a whisper that brought him nearer to her, she murmured:

"And Lionel . . . whatever, *whatever* that was? . . ."

He, too, might have been warned. She had raised her eyes slowly again, and they were widely, poringly, searchingly, fearfully on his, not for one second, but steadily for many seconds. Except by those rounds of troubled blue further sounding of him was impossible; she could only make that deep plummet-cast into his soul and then, sink or swim, mutter a prayer and follow it herself. If the seas of his love would bear her up, well; if not, there was no further help. . . .

And that look, too, allowed him to see, if he would but look, all that lay at the bed and bottom of her own. It acknowledged, confessed, published, proclaimed aloud. Surely, surely, her heart frantically cried, if one may lie by a silence one may tell truth by a look! All, all was for his taking in that look. How else than by a look could she speak? How else? By words? Such a bleeding plucking-forth as that? . . . By more torturing indirections? He would only give them love-blind, honouring, false interpretations! . . . By refusal, now and for always, of what he asked? It would be the best. . . .

And, as if she saw suddenly for the first time what she had been on the brink of doing, she fell back in terror from her own self-beguilings. It was as if the glare of the pit was in her eyes and the reek of its sulphur in her nostrils; she covered her face with her hands and shuddered. No, not that—not that! "No, no, no—you shall not marry me!" she cried, with sudden frenzy.

But his face was grimly set. He knew whether he would marry her or not! "I will marry you!" he muttered.

“No—no——!” Her cry was sharp and broken; a quick bodily pain might have caused such a cry. “No—no——”

“In a month—a week—to-morrow,” came from him.

“No, no—I daren’t—I can’t—it would be—I will not!”

“Ah, you will!—you do!” He could scarcely get out the words for joy.

“No—you must know—he was my lover—my lover!”

It was piercing, but it was too late. He had seized her hand; his grip tightened upon it until the knuckles showed white through the strained skin. By force she held him away at arm’s length, regardless that they could be seen from the fair field below. In her eyes was a wild and affrighted dancing; she was past all questions but one now.

“Do you understand? . . .”

He understood nothing save that he wanted her and could have her. His own eyes were like hot bolts in his face. His other hand had clutched her free one now, and, suddenly looking round sharply, he forced the cluster of hands out of sight down in the grass, bringing his face nearer to hers.

“My love, my love, my love!” he panted, while her own breath came in a succession of little sobs. For the last time she cried:

“Your eyes are open—I’ve told you—never say I haven’t told you—I always vowed I would tell, and I have told. Never *dare* to say I haven’t!”

Now that words meant nothing she repeated them almost mechanically over and over again, as if many nothings might miraculously make something . . . ‘Let him never say she had not told him all . . . never let him reproach her with that!’ . . .

“Ah, it is yes!—Berice, Berice, Berice!” he cried rapturously, holding her away.

One more look she gave him, a lifetime of a look; the next moment he had flung himself backwards on the grass, exhausted as if with a violent physical effort. She had covered her eyes with a hand on which the four bloodless marks of his fingers still showed. She was sobbing convulsively, but with dry eyes. . . .

He had—he had—he *must* have understood!

And in that moment, with the rags and candle and broomstick of her bogy lying dismembered about her—with the sound of her own voice still ringing in her ears and crying, "*Never say I haven't told you!*"—in her utter exhaustion—and in the memory of that long uncurtaining look with which she had searched his soul and laid naked to his gaze all that was at the bottom of her own—she could almost have believed that she had uttered the words themselves.

XIV

THAT evening they massed the bands in the fair field for the final performance of *William Tell*. The brazen eructation reached Berice's ears as she walked in the lily garden at Undershaws. She was alone. She was awaiting the letter which, as she had broken away from Emney that afternoon, asking him not to follow her, he had said he would send.

She was restless and excited. Four hours had elapsed since that stressful scene on the hillside above the fair field, but she suffered from no reaction. Her mind remained, if necessarily at a slightly lesser, still at a high and sustained altitude, and it was likely to remain so. That culminating scene had not been a new and isolated thing ; it had had a long and gradually intensifying backing in her recent experience ; and she knew that a hundred practical matters would presently engage her, to the exclusion of overmuch thought and reconsideration. With one of these practical matters, indeed, a ridiculously trifling one, she was already occupied as she moved among the sealed lilies and the scented night-flowering tobacco plants. She was wondering by what name she could address her accepted suitor.

"*Ta-ra-ra, ta-ra-ra, ta-ra-ra, ra, ra. . .*" The brazen sounds came steadily and unfluctuatingly on the still air. It was the climax of the Feast. To-morrow Cotterdale and Ridsdale would return to their daily labour again, the richer by an experience ; to-morrow she, too, would be busy—the busier the better. There would be the interview with her uncle ; Mrs. Finch-Ommaney and Celia would have to be told ; and there would be Emney himself to see. . . . What *could* she call him ? Until a week ago she had hardly, even

in thought, dowered him with the particularity of a name at all, and even now "Dear Mr. Emney" would have seemed a not inappropriate beginning of the reply she would presently have to write. But that was manifestly absurd. "Harrison" was awkward, probably by reason of its being also a surname; and mere avoidance, even at the beginning, was self-conscious. On the whole, she thought "Harry" would serve. It was the name by which he had said his mother had called him, it escaped being ridiculous, and at the same time it committed her to little beyond what she had insisted on calling their "bargain." . . .

It was as "My dear Harry" that she addressed him in her reply to the note that was presently brought to her—a note that contained pretty much what she had expected it to contain. Nothing could be done until they should have met again, and it was with their next meeting that the letter was concerned. He could hardly wait upon her at Mrs. Finch-Ommaney's house; he could not ask her to wait upon him at Skirethorns; and apparently he left it to her to suggest an alternative. The letter dictated its own reply; she wrote that she would go to Skirethorns—to see her uncle. In another letter she informed Everard of her intention. She sent off her two notes, and joined Mrs. Finch-Ommaney and Celia in the drawing-room.

Mrs. Finch-Ommaney was in her mood of mildest laxity. Neill, it appeared, had called that afternoon, and had told her that the memorial would be ready for casting within a month. Even Berice, ignorant as she was of sculptors and their methods, knew what that meant. Neill had, to all intents and purposes, thrown it up. He was treating the thing as a mere "job," such as an inferior man could have acquitted himself of equally well, and was taking the risk of the damage to his fame should a man with eyes in his head ever come across his work in the remote country church.

Neither Celia nor Mrs. Finch-Ommaney appeared to notice that Berice's spirits were at an unusual tension; the talk never left the subject of the memorial the whole evening; and when Berice went to bed it was to dream that the organist who judged the 'arrangement' of *William Tell*

took a trumpet from Berice's hand and told her that she was blowing something called a 'condition' into it so loudly that he could not hear the other instruments. . . .

It was lest she herself should make a false beginning by exceeding the terms of their compact that, the next morning, at Skirethorns, she cut down her private interview with Emney to ten minutes. It was better to begin with reticence and reserve rather than to take a course at the beginning from which subsequent retirement might prove difficult. She told herself that she had granted, not love, but the chance to love and be loved; he saw her interpretation of their relation in her eyes; and it was from a fear of frightening her that, placing a chair for her and himself taking another one reassuringly removed from it, he for the present accepted that interpretation. Was it, he asked, her wish that their betrothal should be announced immediately? She replied that, unless he particularly wished it otherwise, she saw no reason why it should not be announced. Did she further wish, he asked, that they should be married without any great delay? She replied nervously that since no hot young passion was on its probation their period of betrothal—usually an opportunity for a decent breaking off should it be discovered that a mistake had been made—need not be long. The coming autumn? he suggested. Yes, she replied, that would do. . . .

"Then," he said, "there's the question of where I'm to put myself in the meantime. Under the circumstances you'll hardly want to stay where you are, and I should like to offer you this house. I myself will go to London; I should have to do so for a week or a fortnight in any case. Then, for the days immediately before our wedding, I could put up at the 'Racehorses.'"

Berice thanked him. "But you won't need to put up at the 'Racehorses,'" she said. "Sir John Hartopp's certain to ask either you or my uncle and myself to go and stay with him."

"But you'd prefer that in the meantime I went to London?" he asked.

"Why should I?" she asked, embarrassed.

"I—I don't know," he replied, smiling a little. "I merely

ask you. It shall be just as you wish. I gather that this is strictly a business interview, so it's best not to beat about the bush. By the way," he smiled again, "I might get the better of you in a business interview; I hope you've thought of that."

Berice nodded; she preferred to leave even the mildest jesting alone for the present. "You mean what I called a bargain. We needn't go into that again. It's better to face the facts: then if they turn out to be romantic after all so much the better. That's partly why I should like to get the preliminaries over and begin on a regular footing as soon as possible."

He smiled again. "I must say I'd personally rather think of all the beautiful things that are in front of us," he said, "but just as you prefer. Perhaps it's wise not to begin by expecting too much. All the same——" the affectionate smile told her that he thought she was overdoing even this.

They talked for a little while longer, in much the same strain of awkwardness and reserve; and then she said, "Would you mind if I told my uncle at once, this morning?"

"Not in the very least."

"Then I think I'll do so now."

She rose. He rose also and moved towards her. . . .

Five minutes later she came out with a heightened colour in her cheeks and a quickened and more conscious look in her eyes. Bargains may be bargains, but betrothal is also betrothal. She was a little relieved, too, that one experience to which, truth to tell, she had looked forward with some trepidation had proved, natural shyness apart, not intolerable. . . . She sought her uncle.

She found him in the plantation. She took his arm and walked with him for a minute or two; then, in as few words as possible, she stated the bare facts. Everard nodded many times, and pulled his moustache as she talked. . . .

"Yes—yes," he said, from time to time: and "I see—I see——"

Then, after many minutes of moustache-pulling and yes, yessing, and very much to her surprise, it appeared that Everard also took the matter in some sense as a bargain.

For some minutes she was puzzled, and even a little shocked, for, though he allowed her complete liberty, and would no more have thought of proffering advice unasked than he would have thought of opening her letters, he loved her dearly. And yet a stranger, noting the manner in which he received her news, might have formed conclusions from which the ideas of interest and cupidity would not have been absent. . . . Then suddenly Berice caught a muttered phrase, saw, and laughed. It was a jacket. Everard had all at once developed a full-blown sense of the absoluteness of the words "black and white." For once in his life he was going to "have something down in black and white." What it was to be was a matter of minor importance so long as the black-and-whiteness of it was all right. He murmured vaguely about settlements, 'own rights,' wills. . . .

"You see, Berice," he rumbled in his richest jacket voice, "I only mention this because I take the rest, your happiness and so on, as a matter of course. You're a sensible girl, and I'm sure you wouldn't go into this unless you believed you were going to be happy; so that's taken for granted from the start. I won't say I'm not rather surprised; Emney's not exactly the chap I should have expected you to take; but that's all right as long as you're happy. . . . I've wanted, Berice," he brought this up from the depths of his profoundly sentimental heart,—“for years I've wanted to see you in love and happy; I can't tell you how I wanted that. I don't think it matters very much that it's come a little late; people are more sensible about that than they used to be, I think; you're less likely to lose your head than you would have been seven or eight years ago. I'm very glad, my dear. . . . Still, there *is* this other side of it I speak of. *You* haven't thought of it, of course, but *I* do. *I* see it, once the question of your happiness is settled, as a sort of bargain, if you'll forgive the expression. You can't speak of that, of course—I don't suppose it's entered your head—but I can. So leave all that to me. I'll arrange all that. . . . Are you announcing it at once?"

"Yes. We shall probably be married in the autumn."

"Humph! . . . Well, I don't see why not. It's short work, but it's quite natural you should be eager. Well, well, I must say this *is* a surprise. . . . But leave the rest to me, Berice. I'll see about all that."

"Better have a lawyer if it's a question of documents," Berice said, smiling.

But Everard had read somewhere that a perfectly valid instrument can be drawn up on a half-sheet of notepaper, and as long as the black-and-whiteness was all right he saw no reason to be meticulous about anything else. He merely repeated that Berice might safely leave all that to him. . . .

It was that same evening that she broke her news to Mrs. Finch-Ommaney and to Celia. The effect of the announcement on Mrs. Finch-Ommaney can be expressed only by negations and inversions. With an "Oh, my darling, all, *all* happiness!" she leaned back in her chair, put her cheek caressingly against the cushion, closed her eyes, and smiled as Niobe might have smiled. Berice thought she could read her thoughts. She was not blaming—but she refrained from blaming on the assumption that ultimately nobody was to blame for anything; she was not regretting—but only because regrets mark the visage, and the purple state of grief was so much, so very much more becoming than the black; she was not making mental comparisons as to what might have been—comparisons that involved her peerless boy were hyperbolically out of the question. Doubtless poor Berice had done the best she could under the circumstances—and we are commanded to love everybody, even Berice——

"Oh, I wish you every happiness!" she murmured. . . .

But Berice knew that Mrs. Finch-Ommaney now weakly hated her, and wanted to have her out of the way——

"It has been so self-sacrificing of you to devote yourself to a poor lonely old woman like this," she murmured, with worlds of meaning in her use of the past tense. "Of course, I oughtn't to have asked you. I think I could have managed. We are not visited with grief beyond our power to bear. Yes, I was selfish——"

Berice made no reply.

“And now,” Mrs. Finch-Ommaney murmured, “you’re anxious, no doubt, to spend all the time you can with your sweetheart——”

As Mrs. Finch-Ommaney had not seen Emney, she could not be suspected of the ironical use of a substantive usually applied to younger men than he.

“So I must absolutely forbid you, darling, to waste any more time on me. I don’t know what your arrangements are, but if you stay here—which would be sweet of you—you are to go out just whenever you wish.”

“Thank you,” said Berice, with a slight compression of her lips. She imagined that a hint was given that she *had* been out during the greater part of the last three days. . . .

A little later she walked with Celia in the garden. To Celia she said very little ; to say much would have been cruel. But Celia’s soft heart had little power of retention ; it was enough for it to be full in order to overflow. She wept softly on Berice’s shoulder.

“Oh, Berice !” she sighed presently. “*You—and me !*”

“Hush !” Berice whispered, pressing closer to her.

“I’m not complaining. I love you so. I’m so glad you’re happy, but I can’t help thinking of what might have been.”

“Hush !”

“And—and—there’s another thing. I told you how jealous I was of you at first—I thought mother liked you best, you see—but I’m afraid, oh, I’m afraid she *doesn’t* now !”

“No,” said Berice, again compressing her lips as she remembered Mrs. Finch-Ommaney’s two-edged felicitations.

“I’m so, so sorry ! . . . But I’m glad too for one thing—(oh, how selfish I am !)—but I *am* glad, Berice—glad that even his mother would have been satisfied with me. You don’t mind that, do you ?”

“You poor child !” Berice murmured gently—yet determined that that rag and broomstick and candle-end should not reassemble themselves again. . . .

By morning she had decided that the least undesirable of several rather undesirable courses open to her would be to return to Skirethorns. She announced her intention of

doing so, and Mrs. Finch-Ommaney's murmured protestations and regrets were entirely devoid of opposition.

"Thank you so much, darling, for all you have done for me. . . . What time shall I order the carriage?"

She left on the day that followed that. Sir John Hartopp had acted as Berice had assumed he would, and Emney had availed himself of the proffered hospitality until he should leave for London. A rumour reached Berice that Bunny also was thinking of packing up again, and one day, as she crossed the moor to the painting cottage to despatch a last errand Mrs. Finch-Ommaney had entrusted to her, she saw him in the distance, fairly in flight before her. Apparently he didn't wish either to congratulate her or to omit doing so. She found Neill, however, humming an air over that butchery of his artistic conscience, the memorial. He indicated it with an impenitent smile.

"I shan't trouble you to talk about it now," he said, twinkling.

Berice was a little out of tune with Neill also. While admitting that he had acted in all innocence, she still resented that he should have come near her privacies at all. If it was, as it had seemed to be, a question of anybody being in the wrong, well . . . Neill ought to have known that people are best liked when they mind their own business. . . . She put herself in a careless attitude before the work. "Really," she admitted, "if you hadn't told me you'd thrown it up I shouldn't have known the difference. It seems to me just like Mr. Finch-Ommaney."

"My trouble is that it's not like *me*," Neill laughed. "Never again, I promise you. . . ."

"When will it be ready?" she asked indifferently.

"Oh, any time now. Now that I've modelled my own damnation I haven't any time to waste in regrets. I'm afraid I wasted some of *your* time too, but . . . but I'm not sorry for that. May I wish you all happiness? . . ."

His eyes were on her face with searching gentleness, and she knew very well what he was thinking of her. Before, he had thought her magnificent; now he found her the more magnificent that she had elected, after all, to take up her

life cheerfully and not to make that offering of flesh and blood and the precious stuff of living to an ancient idol out of which the sanctity had departed. She had found him humming an air over his own surrender ; our surrenders are robbed of their bitterness when we can hum an air over them ; and he seemed to find something of the same bravery and cheerfulness in her. For it was on the earth about him, and not in the heavens above, that Murragh Neill sought and found Life's magnificence. In his heart was written that great word of St. Augustine, that they who go most deeply into the human—yea, its imperfections, soilures, disgraces, defeats, notwithstanding—find at last the divine ; and cheerfully to accept the common lot was magnificence's crown. Formerly he had honoured her lie ; he now did her the unspeakable honour of her supposed relinquishment of it. . . .

And she saw it, and, nursing in addition that miserable and wilfully assumed grudge against him, found it harder than anything she had yet had to bear. She bore it as best she could. Perhaps she could not have borne it had she not in those days gone constantly attended by another *self* of whose presence she was intermittently conscious. The presence of this other self stimulated her as an actor is stimulated by the silence and attention of the full theatre. He stood off, this Familiar, watching her as she breasted her life with so proud a prow. Herself was curious about herself. Her own actions had surprises and unexpected turns for her. She wondered what she would do next. . . .

And she amused herself by giving names to this other, this watching portion of herself. Sometimes she called it her Sense of Humour, that observed the proportions of things. Sometimes it was her Pride, that would not suffer the flicker of an eyebrow when out of the ambush an arrow flew. Sometimes it was her Tact, that counselled her when to dodge and evade—her Angel, in the old sense of messenger, that warned her when her guard must be up in a twink—and sometimes it became something for which she had no name, something that gravely and consideringly made notes of the way in which she talked, laughed, wrote letters, or-

dered, planned, arranged, and did her daily business. It lifted an inquiring eyebrow, as if it said, "Excellent—excellent so far—but——"

And once, as she thus surveyed herself, she suddenly and unaccountably found herself thinking of a twig, that had escaped from the tumbled water at the foot of a diminutive fall and was journeying steadily down a mountain stream. . . .

The wave of interest caused by the announcement of her engagement reached the "Cotterdale Arms." They talked of it there. Even the lodger who had taken Ship Brooke's spare room spoke of it.

"Ten—thousand—pounds—a year!" said Ship Brooke in an awed voice. . . . "How much is that a week, Harry?"

"They don't reckon sums like that by t' week," Harry Dean replied.

"It's two hundred pounds a week," said the lodger. . . .

"Two—hundred—pounds—a week! Thirty pund a day a'most! . . . It's like a tale, isn't it?" said Ship, his imagination arrested.

The company agreed that it was like a tale.

XV

THENCEFORWARD until her wedding, Berice's state of slight but even tension did not relax. At last she was on the eve of living her own life, and she could no more contemplate that great fact without excitement than, as a child, she could have lain down to sleep unthrilled by the thought of the picnic of the morrow. True, in anybody else's case she would have smiled at the idea of securing liberty by the deliberate assumption of a bond; but she was Berice Beckwith, in whose favour large exceptions to general rules were to be made. Rules, so long as she was left out of their operation, had her full permission to exist; she even liked them to exist; if her exceptionalness proved them, they in turn proved her exceptionalness; which was all just as it should be. . . .

She intended to be married quietly. A quiet wedding would have the double advantage of being the most pleasing to herself and at the same time by far the easiest under the circumstances. Skirethorns was without mistress, and there was nobody she wished to call in for the occasion. Had Harry attached any sentimental importance to the apparatus of weddings she would have consented to go veiled and blossomed; but she put the question to him in a form that invited an answer in the negative, and he did not refer to the subject again. Harry, in brief, did all she wished. . .

They were to be married on the first Thursday in October, and the September days passed quickly. Bunny had gone away, she did not know where; Neill also had finished his 'job' and departed; and the lodger of the "Cotterdale Arms," presumably an amateur in such things, had been once or twice to inspect the memorial that had been affixed to the

plastered wall of the little church between the two windows nearest the pulpit. The memorial was of bronze, very slightly patined by artifice. The frame that enclosed the head made little appeal to the eye except by the rightness of its proportions and the just spacing of its members, and the lettering on the lower part of it was of finished simplicity. The medal-like head itself, that of a good-looking young man with prominent eyes, high cranium, and a chin that would have been double had he lived, was presented at a slightly over-erect, over-conscious angle; and its slight suggestion of vacancy and lack of personal face might have been attributable to the unsatisfactory conditions under which it had been done. . . .

At Berice's wedding that slab of bronze played a part of its own. From where he stood, Sir John Hartopp, who supported Emney, saw a short vista of profiles that a little struck him. Bridegroom and bride stood together at the rail, looking straight before them towards the altar; a pace in the rear Everard Beckwith, very erect and apparently swallowing something from time to time, looked fixedly in the same direction; and beyond him again, indistinctly seen in the half-light, resembling a shadow head in the shadowy proscenium of a raree-show, the bronze profile looked blankly and rigidly past.

And others than Sir John lifted their eyes to the memorial. As the small party returned from the signing of the register in the vestry, Berice Emney's hand trembled a little on the sleeve on which it lay. Emney, looking up, caught her returning eyes, and he also glanced at the relief; then he pressed his wife's hand. In his heart he prayed that glances of that kind might soon be relegated to the limbo to which they properly belonged. He intended, God giving him strength, to supplant that dream. . . .

In spite of Berice's desire for privacy, many sightseers were waiting to see them come out of the church door. They lined the road, as far as the bridge; and they cheered as the car bore them away. At Skirethorns lodge there was another cluster; but the servants, headed by Jane Warry, the housekeeper, waited up at the house to present their con-

gratulations and the coffee-service, on each piece of which commemorative initials and a date were engraved. Joe Warry made the presentation, and Berice was presently aware of Jane, his wife, who hovered on the outskirts of the assembly, inconspicuously striving to attract her attention. They entered the house. Berice was preparing to go straight up to her room, and already had her hand on the newel, when again she found Jane at her side.

“What is it, Jane? . . . Excuse me one moment, Sir John. . . .”

Jane whispered something.

“Who? . . .” said Berice.

Again Jane whispered. . . .

Emney was thanking Sir John Hartopp for his recent good offices, and Sir John was rubbing his hands, with a general air of congratulating everybody on a deed well done. Everard, rather quiet, was feeling in his pocket the instrument in black and white which he had ready for putting into Berice's hand. Jane was still whispering to Berice. . . .

“But why me? And why now of all times? And why doesn't his name matter?” Berice asked in surprise.

Once more the sibilation of Jane's whispering was heard.

“Harry!” Berice began suddenly; but the next moment she had checked herself. “Never mind—it doesn't matter,” she called. . . . “Where is he, Jane? I'll see him. He may have brought a parcel or something. . . . Where do you say he is?”

“In the housekeeper's room.”

“Very well. Let us have lunch in half an hour.”

She passed through the baize door that led to the kitchens.

The housekeeper's room lay at the end of a long passage, the light of which was cool and green by reason of its transmission through the shrubbery outside. It also had a red-baize door. Berice hesitated for a moment at this door; then she pushed at it and entered. The lodger of the “Cotterdale Arms” rose from Jane Warry's chair as she did so. The round table was covered with a red cloth, on which lay Jane's workbox and spectacles. Berice advanced to the edge of the table.

“ Good morning,” said Berice. “ I know if I seem in a hurry you’ll understand—of course, you know what’s taken place ? ”

The man inclined his head, bashfully, Berice thought, but seemed to hesitate about stating his business.

“ Good morning,” he said. . . .

His prolonged hesitation was a little provoking. She saw no nuptial parcel of which he might be the bearer.

“ Who are you, please, and what do you want ? Please answer at once, as I’m pressed for time,” she urged him. “ Or wouldn’t you rather I sent my husband or my uncle ? ”

He was a small and lightly-built man, dressed in a suit of old but well-cut tweeds, and with a bluish smudge on his upper lip despite the care with which he had shaved, with the little looking-glass propped in the dormer of the “ Cotterdale Arms.” His eyes were large, and resembled two dark grapes ; his hands and feet were minute ; and he spoke in an educated, but deprecating and conciliatory voice, the tone of which fully admitted the oddness of the moment he had selected but pleaded the urgency of his business.

“ Are you Mrs. Emney ? ” he asked.

“ I am,” Berice replied, beginning to lose patience. “ But why do you come to this house and ask for me and not for my husband ? And what makes you choose this particular time ? ”

“ It is unusual,” he said in profoundly apologetic tones, “ but it was not altogether my choice ; and I was compelled to ask for you because it was you I specially wanted to see.”

Berice made a movement towards the door. “ I don’t think your business can be anything my husband may not know. If you’ll sit down again I’ll send him to you.”

Already she was at the door ; but suddenly he put up a small white hand.

“ Please ! . . . That would entirely defeat the purpose I’ve come for. Believe me, it would only make it more difficult. I should be obliged to talk about something quite different, you see—to ask him for something I really don’t want—a recommendation to a place, perhaps—and he might not

regard even that as a sufficient explanation why I should choose this particular time."

"Oh? You do appreciate the oddness of the time you've chosen, then?"

"Yes."

"Then state your business briefly, and I'll decide whether I send for him or not. And first tell me who I'm talking to."

His name was as smooth, undistinguished, and as like other names as he was like other men—Walker. Berice wondered where she had heard it before. . . .

"I'm afraid that doesn't tell me much," she said, tapping with her finger on the table as if in measurement of the time that was passing.

"I don't know whether I may ask you to sit down," said Walker, timidly indicating a chair.

"Come, be quick," said Berice, tapping again. She was noticing again those very old but very well-cut clothes.

"I'm from India," said Walker, turning his dark, grape-like eyes sorrowfully on her.

The sickness that came suddenly over her heart was horrible. For a moment it was inexplicable also. It was but compensatory that Berice Beckwith's joys should be more keenly felt than the joys of other women, since she was so defenceless against stabs. Or almost defenceless. That bright blade of his words, thrust into the heart of another woman, would have met first with outer softness, then with a core made sound and hard by principle; but only an outer rind of hardness enclosed whatever Berice's heart contained. That pierced, the rest offered no resistance. She was vulnerable to the very centre. . . .

But that exterior was not pierced yet. Bruised it might be, but it turned the thrust. And the sickness also abated a little. She had remembered the name.

"You are from India? Your name is Walker? I see. . . . You were with Mr. Finch-Ommaney when he died, were you not?"

"I was. I was lately chaplain of the Malverns. I left India soon after he died."

Berice drew herself up. "I see. . . . Then I'm afraid

you've been sent to the wrong house. Mr. Finch-Ommaney's home was at Undershaws, in Ridsdale; this is Skirethorns, in Cotterdale. If you'll wait here a moment I'll have you shown the right way."

Again she turned her back on him and moved to the door.

But she stopped at a light sound. He had tapped softly on the table with his finger. He was leaning slightly forward. Just so he might have leaned forward over a desk or a pulpit, to expound, to enforce, to bring something home to the hearts of his hearers without more peremptoriness than was necessary. He seemed capable of putting great charm into his voice; it was now almost thrush-like in its melodiousness.

"Please don't go," he said flutily. "Believe me, Mrs. Emney, you ought to be glad I've come."

Her hand, which had gone to the door, was arrested there. She knew that she must hear what he had to say.

"I can't give you more than a minute or two," she said in a faint voice. "You must make haste, or——"

"Then I'll be as short as I can," he said, with an inclination of his head. "But come away from the door, please. Don't stand at the door. There's nothing to be gained by your standing at the door."

Berice moved towards the table again. Walker had picked up one of Jane Warry's reels. He was examining it as if it was some rare and interesting object. Suddenly he put it down again, and their eyes met, his so large and dark and velvety, hers of ice blue.

"I'm from India," he said again.

"What is it you want?"

He took up the reel again. He seemed overcome with humility and confusion. His air was the disconcerted air of the man whose good deed, done in secret, is brought against his wishes to light.

"I was lately chaplain of the Malverns. As you surmise, I knew the officer you mentioned. What an admirable portrait of him that is in the church, by the way——!"

"Tell me what it is you want," said Berice in a voice that shook.

“ The poise of the head is particularly well caught : poor fellow ! . . . But as I was saying, you were quite right in your surmise that I knew him. . . . Ah, if you would only surmise a little more——! ”

He sighed, as if it was profoundly regrettable, but still almost too much to have hoped for, that Berice's surmises should go any further.

“ I was hoping,” he continued falteringly, “ I was hoping that—when I said I came from India—you would jump at the rest——”

A fire burned brightly in the housekeeper's room ; it was reflected in the brass of the candlesticks on the dresser and in the copper bed-warmers on the walls. As that sickness once more came like a rising tide over Berice's heart the glowings and twinklings swam and ran into one another before her eyes. In their blurred brightness she seemed to see a picture—a picture of herself and Emney lying on a hillside above a noisy fair field. The blaring of *William Tell* was loud in her ears again ; she seemed again to feel on her hand that grasp of his that had left the four bloodless bars ; and she was almost conscious of her own voice ringing vehemently out again : “ *I have told you—never say I haven't told you ! . . .* ”

And of course she *had* told him, all, all. He knew, accepted, condoned. Hardly more than an hour had yet passed since, in that knowledge, he had married her ; and all henceforward was clear—the future was bright—the past dead——

She told herself all this, angrily, passionately. . . .

But for all that Walker saw her reel, and took a quick half-step round the table to catch her. But, as if his half-extended arms had some repelling and righting power over her, she recovered herself. Her brows were knitted, her lips parted, her eyes tightly closed.

“ He knows—he knows——! ”

The whisper came harshly ; she did not mean Walker : but Walker made little movements of his hands as if to soothe her.

“ Yes, yes ; that's all right ; gently, gently. . . . Of course I know, but that can be arranged—that's all right——”

But she opened her eyes suddenly wide. Did he think she meant *he* knew? . . .

“No, no, no, no!” she cried. “I don’t mean *you* know—whatever there is for you to know—there isn’t anything, though—but my husband—I mean *he* knows——!”

And yet for the first time a subtle doubt had crept into her words, weakening their conviction. Now that she cried it aloud she seemed, somehow—how, she knew not—less certain. She *had* told him—but did he *know*? Oh, she *had* told him—never thenceforward might he say she had *not* told him—and he must—must, *must* know! . . . What an insane idea, to suppose that he did not! This man’s sudden visit must have turned her head that she could suppose for one moment a thing so monstrous and ridiculous! Truly, she told herself, she must be unbalanced to go on repeating that “He does know, he does know!” even to herself! . . .

But that subtle doubt had communicated itself to him also, and he had instantly fastened on it. It is only by the honourable that a lie is honoured; among the dishonourable it has no currency. He, a liar, a broken man, kicked out of the Army for no matter what, thought he saw through her. They had something in common. She had brought herself down to his level.

“Oh, forgive me!” he apologized almost abjectly. . . . “I’m compelled to believe that you *think* that’s the truth; I’m sure you wouldn’t say it otherwise”—it was plain mockery and hypocrisy that he gave her—“but—forgive me if I happen to use an inconsiderate word; the time is so short—I was going to say, that the probabilities are distinctly against it. I don’t mind saying,” he continued, “that that was precisely the thing I feared at one time. I really did fear that. That was why I took the risk—it was rather a serious risk to take, too, for you *might* have told him—but I know now you didn’t—so I took the risk of coming at this inopportune moment. A day or two ago would have been too early, you see; you *would* have told him then, and either he would have . . . or else . . . but we needn’t go into that. The practical point is, that if you’d told him you wouldn’t be listening to me now.”

Berice choked. "I'm not — I *will* not — I'll fetch him——"

But she did not fetch him. He knew she would not fetch him. Twice already she had started for the door and had come back at a word; that did not look like fetching him. She was listening, and for the present he was safe. . . .

But he might as well have said in so many words, "Come, don't try your games on with me; I see the sort *you* are." . . .

"But," he continued, with downcast eyes, "we're really wasting words. As I say, all that can be arranged. That's why I said you ought to be glad to see me. If it's convenient to you to arrange it now. . . ."

She felt herself caught in the backwash, not of her original act, but of the act she had trusted would efface the original act. She had counted on marriage to efface it absolutely, and yet it was by that very marriage that she was caught. This man, who had crept so noiselessly, so sidlingly into her life that the first she had known of him was that he had been there, had taken his chance that she had not told, had deliberately waited until telling, if it had not taken place, was made impossible (but that was of course ridiculous, she caught herself quickly up—she *had* told), and was now before her proposing, apparently, that she should commit some third act, she knew not what, for the effacement of the other two. As a twig that is caught in the reverse current of some stream travels up again to the tumbled water that presently will once more swallow it up, so she felt herself yet again in the grasp of the thing she had considered past and done with.

And stranger than all was that there was positive relief in being so caught. There was at any rate the relief of knowing the worst. She had weathered those muddy waters before; well, she must do so again, that was all. . . .

Moreover, she was sufficiently mistress of herself again to recognize that once more a choice was presented to her. On the one hand she had but to raise her voice and this creature would indeed be shown the way out of Cotterdale and into Ridsdale or any other dale that was not too hot to hold him; on the other—what? He had not said yet.

She had momentarily closed her eyes. By the time she had opened them again she had determined that the second alternative was—well, to be considered. If only to avoid a scene, and the causing of her husband the pain which, hide it as he might, the thought of his predecessor must almost necessarily cause him, it was to be considered. She turned to Walker again.

“ You spoke of arrangement,” she said shortly. “ I admit nothing, you understand, but I must know what you’re talking about. Arrangement of what ? ”

He had shown certain signs of a quite well-bred impatience, but his manner now became suddenly shy again. He seemed to be revolving inoffensive ways of putting what he had to say, and then again he seemed to be thinking that it was time to be off. Sooner or later the rather indefensible thing would have to be approached, however, and on the whole sooner seemed better than later. . . .

“ Arrangement,” he murmured, with deference, “ of the terms on which you may receive a packet of letters.”

“ Letters,” she repeated, nodding. “ Letters. ‘ The letters ’—quite melodramatic. . . . Whose letters ? ”

“ Your own.”

“ My letters ? ”

“ Yes.”

There was a heavy silence.

By and by she resumed.

“ My letters. . . . I gather, from your sense of the importance of them to me, that you’ve read them ? ”

Oh! . . . His shocked, deprecating gesture suggested that she had said something indecent.

“ You’ve read them ? ” A sudden crimson, not at all beautiful, had flooded her face.

“ To the extent of getting your address, of course,” he protested, with a pained look. How had she supposed he had got her address, if not from the letters ? . . .

“ And is the knowledge of the address the basis of the arrangement you speak of ? ” she demanded.

His embarrassment was positively touching.

“ Oh, Mrs. Emney . . . need we go into that ? Naturally,

the most cursory glance told me that—that probably the things were better in your hands. . . .”

“In short, you read them?”

“Believe me——”

“*Tch!*” The sound might have come from some animal in a state of nature.

He began to pace the hearthrug in his distress. He looked up sharply for a moment to say, “I hope we’re safe from interruption in here?” and then paced it again. Then once more he turned his dark, velvety eyes on her.

“I wish you’d let me tell you one thing at once,” he said not, she thought, without menace.

“Oh, a hundred!” she said, tossing out a laugh.

“It’s this: that it won’t advance matters one inch that you’re able to show that I’m doing—well, an unpleasant thing. I know it very well. I’m exceedingly sorry I have to do it—sorrer, probably, than you. But I’m driven to it. I needn’t tell you how—circumstances drive me, and I’ve no choice. And if *I’m* driven to it, so (if you’ll forgive my saying so) are *you*. To put it plainly, we’re both horribly intrigued. Who’s the deepest in it I can’t say; perhaps you are, perhaps I am; and perhaps, on the other hand, we are all, best and worst of us alike, what circumstances make us. Don’t let us leave ourselves out of the charity it is our duty to extend to all alike.”

Berice almost laughed in his face. He seemed injured, put himself on his dignity.

“I’m sorry you don’t take it a little more—accommodatingly,” he said. “Well, perhaps that’s natural. We needn’t discuss it. We’d better pass on to something else.”

“Please do.”

“I will. I’ll even put it bluntly, as the time is short. Here it is: There’s something which you may or may not want, but which you ought—you really ought—to possess”—(Read those letters? Berice thought; from his tone he probably had them by heart!)—“you ought to have them, if it’s only so that nobody else, myself included, may get hold of them. And I hope you’ll believe me when I say that I should positively luxuriate in the idea of being able to

hand them to you and of then immediately taking my departure."

"But?" Berice prompted. "Isn't there a 'but'?" . . .

"The only 'but' about it, Mrs. Emney——"

"Please don't use my name."

"—the only 'but' about it is that I am most anxious to be assured beforehand that my generosity won't cost me anything."

Berice was actually interested in his windings and turnings. "Cost you? What should it cost you?"

"It might cost me certain deprivations that would amount to a positive punishment."

"A punishment? . . ." She was honestly trying to follow him.

"If it is not the *mot juste*, please pass it; I am a little agitated. I am in need. I have, believe me, perfectly legitimate needs. The ideas of punishment and reward go together, and I shudder to think what certain deprivations might mean——"

"What have your needs got to do with me?" she inquired. He smiled gently, almost sadly.

"Ah! . . . What, for that matter, have yours to do with me?"

"Ah! . . ."

"Forgive, oh, forgive the apparent brutality! . . . But it is, it *is*, give and take. I wish to avoid even the remotest idea of an exchange—oh, I abhor that! That is why I say that I should rejoice to make you a present but for a fear—an unworthy fear, perhaps, but still a faint fear. . . . Will you," he demanded suddenly, "do me a great favour? It is to regard me merely as a beggar—a beggar with needs of the most pressing description?"

"Why?" She really did not see why.

"In order," he explained, "that the two ideas may be dissociated—the idea of a bargain, and my most deplorable necessity. I'm sure you'll see that these two things are only accidentally related—only accidentally related——"

His tone was supplicating. Berice began to see where he was.

"I see. . . . You want me to give you something freely that you'll proceed to extort if I don't. I see. . . ."

"No, no, no!" he murmured, revolted at the expression.

Berice had gone to the window and was looking out over the shrubbery. For one moment, one moment only, a dull shock had smitten at her heart. The rag and the broomstick and the candle had stirred again—member had sought member—the parts had reassembled—the bogey had shown for one moment complete; and the shock had been that *without it* her life had seemed empty, and that there was comfort in looking on its grinning, familiar visage again. . . . But that lasted barely a second; her husband did know—did know; and only to spare him pain had she refrained from sending for him to deal with this man himself ten minutes ago. He *did* know. . . . angrily, past patience with herself, she assured herself yet again that he did know, and that it was only the disbelief of the man on the hearthrug that shook for a moment her own belief in what she knew to be true. . . . that was the hateful result of being distrusted—one distrusted one's self. . . .

Yet, though Harry did know, it would be merely pitiless that he should be told details—pitiless, indecent. He had not wanted to know them—nay, he *had* wanted *not* to know them. She was burningly red again; she had remembered those letters, had remembered, too, that the man behind her had seen them. . . . Who, with a heart in which a single humane impulse stirred, could commit the butchery of thrusting this unrequired knowledge on a heart happy in its ignorance of it? It was unthinkable. The creature behind her was right; the things *were* best in her own hands—there, and then into the fire. And since he proposed terms, she must accept them for her husband's sake and her own. At any rate, she might as well know the sum of his demands. Money, of course, she knew that. . . .

She turned.

"How much?" she asked, as a man might contemptuously ask the price of a thing it is hardly likely he will buy.

He put up his hand again, as if the brutality of her words hurt him like a physical blow.

“Not that way, not that way!” he implored.

“Come . . . the time’s getting short. . . .”

“It happens that not less than five hundred pounds will relieve my needs. . . .”

“Five hundred pounds. . . . Be so good as not to speak again till I’ve had a little time to consider.”

She turned to the window again, once more in her life confronted with a choice.

She proceeded to consider it.

Five hundred pounds. . . . The money would have to come from her husband. She would have to go to him and tell him, to-day, on his wedding day, that she wanted five hundred pounds. She would either have to refuse absolutely to tell him why she wanted it, letting him think what he would, or else would have to remind him of what she had told him that afternoon on the hillside overlooking the fair field—yes, she would have to remind him of that in order to make doubly sure (thanks to these vile doubts the cringer on the hearthrug had contrived somehow to instil into her) that he *did* understand everything. She would have to tell him that her need for the money came of that previous affair and to trust to him for his own peace of mind not to inquire further. . . .

Yesterday it would have been easier—to-day was, after all, a day too late. . . .

A day too late? Was it *only* a day too late? Was it not everlastingly and for ever too late? Was it not so much too late that now she *had* no choice—that the only course now for her to take was to open the door of the housekeeper’s room, to call for Harry, and to let him deal with this soft-spoken, soft-treading creeper into houses as he thought fit? . . .

It was the only thing to do. That, too, would involve the laceration of his heart, but it was preferable to the other, and, she thought, with a bitter smile, would save five hundred pounds. He must bear it as he could. . . .

And on his wedding day! . . .

She took a stride towards the door.

But she did not reach the door. Half-way to it there broke on her brain a blaze of golden light. She *had* five

hundred pounds! That laughed-at black and white jacket of her uncle's *had* given her money! It had given her power to draw, to a given extent per annum, on her husband's account—Everard had the things, pass-books, or whatever they were, all ready to put into her hand—he had told her so the evening before! How much money this put her in possession of, and by what mysterious process of pen and paper she could come by it, she did not know; she had never had an account, and hardly knew a cheque-book from the marriage lines in her purse; but she knew that between asking Harrison for the money and refusing this soft-voiced scoundrel's offer there was a middle way—the thing her heart loved—a compromise——

Hardly knowing what she did, she proceeded to examine the compromise.

Instantly its beauty dazzled her. Hitherto she had run, as it were, hither and thither, cropping every shoot of some rank and deeply-buried growth as it had appeared above the surface; but here was its hidden root, the destruction of which would put an end to that upspringing for ever. She had walked among dangers, but there could not possibly, not possibly, be anything after this. The axe once laid at this root and all was ended. The seasons would pass; the soil of her heart would recover; where the stinking weed had been flowers would grow . . . prophetically she saw them. . . .

But all this was no thanks to the man who awaited her reply on the hearthrug. She faced him again, looking him up and down as if she sought his most vulnerable point.

“Five hundred pounds,” she repeated, but with a tempest gathering on her brow.

Ah, who, to judge from his gesture, deprecated it but he!

“Have you got them with you?”

He had.

“Put them on that table.”

He did so.

Berice did not know what it was in the small square, string-tied packet—it had no outer covering—that should have moved her to a mirthless laugh. Perhaps it was pure

bewilderment, wonder where all that old pathos had gone to. For she did not delude herself that that packet had any pathos for her now. Once, long ago, she had wondered, reading some novel or other, whether it was not a convention of the novelists that the long-dead rose-leaves laid between the pages of old romance conserved even physically their fragrance; certainly the packet now before her suggested nothing but the mustiness of the long-unopened volume. Their place was where the other half of the correspondence, those other letters of an ardour so curiously kindled from those she looked at, had long since been—at the back of the fire. She had absolutely no curiosity to untie the string and to take a peep into the past. There they were . . . and there was the housekeeper's fire. . . .

But there remained this merchant in the old and well-cut clothes to dispose of before that matter could be settled. Horsewhip him she could not, but she could set another kind of weal upon him. She turned to him.

“Are you still in the Church?” she asked lightly.

For answer she had a quick, darkling look.

“The Church *and* the Army—kicked out of both?”

He repeated the look.

“Wouldn't *two* hundred pounds meet those needs you spoke of?”

He opened his lips. “It would not.”

“Not,” she continued, “that it makes any difference to me. I merely want you to see what I'm doing. I'm making you earn your five hundred pounds. I'm making you haggle—chaffer—beating you down, you know. You tried to get out of that—you wanted to do it delicately; that was the idea, wasn't it? Well, as you see, I'm not letting you.”

His look was dangerous, but the thrush-like voice was as controlled as ever.

“Need we adopt this tone?” he asked. “You see, you have the advantage of me.”

“The advantage of your chivalry and your respect for women? . . . Very well. We've said all that need be said. I accept. If you'll wait here I'll fetch you your wages.”

She was, of course, supposed all this time to be dressing;

and it was necessary before she could get the money that she should send word to her uncle that she wished him to come up to her room. She must risk his surprise at her request. She went out, and passed upstairs by the servants' staircase. She reached her room.

It took her less than a minute to unfasten her dress at the throat, loosen her hair, and put a wrap about her shoulders. Then she rang the bell.

"Please ask Mr. Beckwith to be good enough to come up for a moment," she said.

In three or four minutes Everard came up. "Come in," she said through a mouthful of hairpins, and he entered. She knew that he had what she wanted in his pocket, and she wondered whether she would have to ask for it. . . .

"I only wanted to ask you—to ask you to ask them to excuse me for being so long," she said, her voice suddenly breaking a little.

Everard thought he knew what she really wanted. For many years he had been nearer to her than anybody else, and he thought she wanted to see him once more, if only for a moment, before passing for ever out of his keeping. His eyes grew suddenly moist. Quickly he crossed the room, and took her into his arms. Twice, thrice, he kissed her forehead; he held her strained for a moment longer to him; and then, releasing her, he assumed a monstrous briskness.

"There. That's enough of that. God bless you, my dear. . . . Now hurry down to lunch; we're all famished. . . . And oh, by the way, I've a little present for you——"

He put a bundle down on her dressing-table, told her again to hurry up, and went out.

She had torn the bundle open almost tigerishly before the door had closed behind him. Her fingers sought by instinct and closed quickly on what she wanted—a slim, pale blue cheque-book. Hurriedly she arranged her hair again, slipped out of her wrap, and, with her dress still unfastened at the throat, ran downstairs again by the way she had come up.

She found Walker where she had left him.

"Your triumph has to be quite complete," she said hurriedly. "I have never written a cheque—I am as

unworthy of your steel as that. Show me where the figures go. . . .”

He showed her. She was to make it payable to herself, to endorse it, and to leave it uncrossed. It would have to be presented in London, but he was pretty sure that, even had she known the procedure, she would not stop it by wire.

“I shouldn't trouble about the counterfoil,” he said, “nor yet about *that*——”

‘That’ was the blotting of the cheque with Jane Warry's blotter. He took it up, looked at it again, and dried it before the fire. It was on her lips to say, “Every man to his trade,” but already she had degraded herself sufficiently. He put the cheque into his pocket, and handed her the packet of which it was the price.

“Use the front door if you like, but that's the back one,” she said, pointing to a scullery.

He walked noiselessly out, and she sat slowly down in Jane Warry's chair. . . .

Five minutes later she had cut the string of the bundle—but this merely that the things should be consumed the more quickly. She bent over the fire. One hand held her wedding dress from scorching. She dropped the letters into the fire in a little flat shower; then she stood to watch them burn. Now and then a word started fitfully forth, red for a moment on the half-consumed sheet: then the mass became black and choked the fire. She thrust at it with the poker, and, seeing the string that had bound the packet lying within the fender, she cast that also into the fire. All, with the exception of the single letter that Walker, with a quick glance towards the baize door of the house-keeper's room, had, untying the string and then tying it up again, abstracted from the bundle and placed in his pocket during Berice's absence, was consumed; and as Berice turned away from the fire it occurred to her that twice that morning she had signed her name—once in the register in the church, and once at the foot of the first cheque she had ever drawn.

BOOK II
LONDON

XVI

IT seemed to Berice, as she stood, dressed for dinner, looking out of the window across the plane trees of the Embankment, that Bartholomew was taking things a little for granted in keeping her waiting. She was in two minds about going on to Lady Haverford's alone and settling the account of Bartholomew's unpunctuality afterwards. But, besides wanting to go to Lady Haverford's, she rather particularly wanted to go there with Bartholomew. She wanted to show Harry that he could not grant and then withdraw permissions according to the whim of the moment and expect more than the barest technical obedience from her.

Then the clock on the mantelpiece of the large drawing-room chimed half-past eight, and she knew it was she who was early and not Bartholomew who was late. She smiled that she should be early. Positively, anyone would have thought she was eager. . . . Nevertheless, the discovery that it was earlier than she had supposed was not enough to turn her thoughts into a different channel.

It was not as if he—Harry—had done her the courtesy to give her a sufficient reason for his change of attitude in regard to Bartholomew. He had, it was true, given her a sort of reason, but he had not made the giving of it any the more gracious by his remark, that she appeared not so much to want reasons as to be allowed to make herself the judge whether those reasons were sufficient. She had put it, she

thought, perfectly plainly to him that day in Paris, as they had been returning from Italy—gently, but quite plainly. Not in so many words, of course, but nevertheless unmistakably, she had given him to understand that if he tried to drive her he must not be surprised if he found her, so to speak, a little hard in the mouth. But that was just the trouble with Harry. He did not take hints. Things had to be put plainly before he saw them. He was slow at the uptake; by the time things had been fairly driven home to his mind all the bloom of intercourse had vanished; and he was dreadfully, dreadfully heavy-handed at the return. In a word, he was slow company. Bartholomew, whom hitherto she had met always with Harry's consent and under his eyes, was at any rate not slow. . . .

Of course, the state of Harry's health complicated matters too. At first Berice had tried to make the state of his health account for this sudden idea he had taken into his head about Bartholomew, but she had quickly seen her error. His health had nothing to do with it. He was not so ill as all that; it was merely his narrowness and dullness. True, he had not managed to shake off that chill, contracted in Rome, that for a month had made her at one and the same time his bride and his sick nurse; but he was well enough to attend to his business, and, the doctor had repeatedly told her, as long as care was exercised there was no danger whatever.

It had been that same morning that, to all appearances suddenly, he had adopted this new attitude towards Bartholomew. And even in adopting it he had made little of it. It was, he had said, "something and nothing," and, he had explained, all he wanted was that she should not "see too much of him." She had hesitated before replying, in order that she might hit the right note between forbearance and not too much forbearance.

"But I thought you didn't in the least mind our going about together—usually the three of us, of course, but quite often lately without you?" she had demurred.

"That is so," he had replied, putting a pair of slippers into a kit-bag—he had to spend the night away from home.

“ Yes, that is so. All I’m saying is that I’d rather you didn’t see *too* much of him.”

“ Oh, for that matter,” she had replied, with a little impatient toss, “ ‘ too ’ anything is excessive, and I suppose undesirable. Do you mean that you’d rather I didn’t go with Mr. Bartholomew to Lady Haverford’s this evening? ”

“ No, I don’t mean that. N-o—I don’t mean that.”

“ Because if that’s the case you needn’t go to the length of absolute forbiddance. I can stay at home without that.”

“ No, I don’t mean that at all,” he had repeated, rising from the kit-bag. “ And, of course, I know quite well that *I* invited him here in the first place, and that I haven’t in the least minded your being seen with him from time to time. But—but—well, it’s a matter of degree—of frequency, you know.”

“ Do you mean that you don’t trust Mr. Bartholomew? ” she had asked stiffly.

“ What nonsense! ” he had exclaimed. “ Of course I trust him ; I shouldn’t have him here if I didn’t. But it all depends what you mean by trust. One may trust a man with some things, but there are others one prefers to keep in one’s own hands.—No, I don’t distrust Bartholomew.”

“ But something seems to have occurred that’s altered your opinion of him.”

“ Nothing’s occurred, I tell you—nothing at all. But you’ll see that as the author of the *Aubade* he’s one thing, and quite another in being too intimate with you.”

“ Oh, ‘ too ’ ! . . . But it wasn’t merely as the author of the *Aubade* that you first asked him here to dine. There seems to have been a sort of friendliness too.”

“ I’ve asked plenty of men here to dine. . . . ”

“ Yes—and without forbidding me their company at other times.”

He had made a little impatient movement. “ I’m not forbidding you anything, Berice. I’m only asking you to exercise care.”

Berice had considered this for a moment. Then :

“ I see. . . . It comes to this : that you don’t forbid me,

but you'd like me to forbid myself. I thought we went over all that that afternoon in Paris. . . .”

For weeks Harrison Emney had been trying to grasp what actually had taken place between them that afternoon in Paris, and he had succeeded only indifferently. It had been a mystifying little incident that had given rise to their wrangle. Her pass-book had been the beginning of it. In the new felicity of possessing a private banking account she had been ignorant of the periodic necessity for balancing that pass-book, and, indeed, through some slight irregularity on Everard's part (even in his unwearable jackets Everard always left a stitch out somewhere), she had not been immediately supplied with that parchment-bound source of alarms. It had only reached her, with a mass of accumulated correspondence, in Paris, when they were almost home again; and Harry had taken it upon himself to explain the book's uses. She had listened uninterestedly; she had been unconscious of danger; and, opening the book, he had seen the single item on the debit side. The magnitude of the sum had pulled him up for a moment, but he had quickly recovered himself and gone on with his explanation. He had asked for her cheque and paying-in books that he might explain the more clearly. . . .

He had made no comment; he did not propose ever to make any comment; but by this time she had understood that something was happening, and had become uneasy. Rather stammeringly she had volunteered a statement.

“I drew rather a lot, you see. I didn't know whether I could—whether I could get it while we were away——”

“But I thought I explained to you what a circular note was?”

“Oh, these things puzzle me. I think I like Jane Warry's way the best—she puts her money in an old bag at the bottom of the flour bin.”

Self-accused, she had not liked his silence. She had half wished he would question her. But he had made no sign whatever.

“The bank's safer,” he had merely replied. “It would

have been better if you'd told me, that's all. You see, it's a large sum of money to be carrying from hotel to hotel; I don't like the idea of putting temptation in any poor devil's way, which it might easily be doing. If you haven't spent it all it would be better to pay it in again."

Perhaps he had seen that her look positively invited him to question her, that he might put himself to that extent in the wrong; but still never a word had passed his tongue. She had grown more uneasy still. She knew that he knew that all disbursements during their journey had been made by him, and that even her own immediate expenses had come directly out of his pocket; he must be wondering, wondering . . . she fancied he was even rather overdoing his appearance of not wondering. . . .

"Suppose," she had broken out presently, unable to keep silence, "suppose I haven't got it to pay in? I may have spent it."

"You probably have. In that case you can't pay it in."

"You must think I've been very extravagant."

"My dear," he had replied, "I wasn't thinking anything. I don't want to know. Your allowance is your own, and all I'm doing is to put you into the way of these things so that you may know for the future."

"Oh!" she replied. . . . "I fancied I detected a reproach."

"You were quite mistaken, dearest."

"Oh, well, so much the better," she had remarked. . . .

Her tone had surprised him a little. "Why do you say that, Berice?" he had inquired.

She had made no reply.

"Why do you say so much the better, darling?"

"Oh, nothing," she had replied. . . . "It doesn't matter," she had added. . . .

But she had been right in her surmise, that he *had* been wondering about that unexplained sum of five hundred pounds. Deny it as he would, she guessed him to be wondering now—and the unexpected decision with which he next spoke went far to confirm her.

"Excuse me, dear, but there *is* something, and it *does*

rather matter. You say that something is 'so much the better,' and it's part of something—a tone you've adopted towards me for a week or two past. Have I offended you in any way?"

"Not the least in the world," she had replied off-handedly . . . and, since she would give none, he had cast about for possible causes of offence himself.

"I know, dear, you wanted to break our journey so that we could go to Roussillon for a few days, but I tried to explain that I had to come back on short notice on very important business."

That also, she had replied, was of no consequence. . . . She had only had a fancy to go to Roussillon because of something Mr. Bartholomew had written about the place. . . .

"Then what is it, my darling? Do tell me, and if I've been wrong I'll try to make amends. . . ."

She had not been able to tell him to his face that she sometimes found him dreadfully heavy company, nor had she been able quite to leave it alone. She had complained, insinuated, guarded herself. . . . The scene that had followed had been unedifying. It had been that scene she had had in her mind when she had spoken of 'going over all that in Paris.'

He had continued the packing of his bag, and she had tapped fretfully with her foot.

"What I can't make out," she had said presently, "is why you've so suddenly taken a new point of view about a man who a little while ago was your friend. You have taken a new point of view."

"Well . . . say I have," he had admitted, busy with combs and brushes.

"So that all that we said in Paris—you know what I mean—about the understanding we married on—you've changed your mind about all that?"

He had answered with marked slowness.

"I never looked on that understanding—which I'm beginning to get a little tired of, by the way—as a kind of law of the Medes and Persians for either of us. We shan't advance matters much by tugging different ways, Berice.

If our 'bargain' is the rigid thing you seem to think it, it's a little ridiculous. When *you* offer a suggestion, *I* don't immediately conclude it's an attempt to overreach me."

" 'Overreach' ? "

" Well, perhaps it's not a lucky word. What I mean is, that I'm merely acting as I think will be the best for both of us."

" But to-morrow you may have changed your mind again."

" That," he had said slowly, " is quite possible."

" And I shall have to accommodate myself again. . . . I wish you'd tell me *what* has so suddenly become the matter with Mr. Bartholomew."

Silences such as had begun to take place between Harrison Emney and his wife are not productive of good. If hard words are spared, hard thoughts are not, and probably the words are only delayed. Without good will, silences become cantankerous, intentions are misinterpreted, harsh occasions arise of themselves. Emney had no quarrel with Bartholomew; there was nothing in his wife's attitude to which exception could be taken; and yet he was uneasy in his mind. Until then they had been happy; his hopes, that he could make her as happy as himself, had seemed on the point of being fulfilled; but now, as two chemicals, innocuous when separately taken, may yet react on one another to the engendering of a harmful product, so vague fears stirred within him of the possible result of this acquaintanceship for which he himself had been responsible.

And he was taking serious risks in putting these fears into words. He was giving them recognition—possibly existence. And he was alive to this risk. Already he had once caught himself thinking of that which might come of his wife's intimacy with Bartholomew as 'It,' and he could take no steps to lay this spectre without by the same steps invoking it. He knew not what to do. He only knew that prevention was better than cure, that even a momentary harshness and unreasonableness that might afterwards be found to have been justifiable was better than the graver risk, and that at the same time he must proceed gently and without heat. . .

" Suppose, darling," he had continued presently, " suppose

we put it in this way. I'm making no suggestion whatever against Bartholomew, you understand; I'm not aware that there's any to be made. He's the author of several very charming books, and a very different sort of man from—well, from Keigwyn, for instance, whom I have *not* had here. But don't you see his coming here to dinner occasionally is one thing, and his being seen about with you very much is quite another? Of course, I may be quite wrong, but even then I should think my feeling in the matter was something worth considering."

"But," Berice had objected fretfully, "but . . . well, it will certainly seem odd to Lady Haverford. You give your permission, and then for no reason at all you withdraw it again. I should have thought that was just the way to draw attention to—to whatever the dreadful thing is you have in your mind."

"I haven't withdrawn my permission. On the contrary, I should very much like you to go to-night."

"Lady Haverford will be obliged to you, that you think the people who go to her house fit to meet. . . . Well, if you want me to go, what's this discussion all about?"

"No more about to-night than about any other night. Nor," he had added, "any less."

"I see. . . . You'd really be best pleased if I never saw Mr. Bartholomew again."

He had protested.

"There's no need for that. There is a medium."

Thereupon Berice had given an aggressively patient sigh.

"If only I knew what you *do* mean!—"

"Dear," he had reproached her gently, "don't pretend that you see no difference between being his charming hostess in case I should ask him again, as I probably shall, and—well, and not letting it go much further than that."

She had given a dry laugh.

"Oh, I promise you that if I'd suspected all this I should have let it stop at the beginning! I only knew that I liked Mr. Bartholomew well enough, and thought that you did. But perhaps you'll have changed again by to-morrow. . . ."

It had been more than half-way to an open flouting of

him, and not without its effect on him; but still he had borne with her.

“There are only two ways, Berice—intimacy, and not intimacy. There won’t be a third to-morrow.”

“Well, that’s something. . . . Forgive me if I seem irritated; it’s difficult to do what you’d like without knowing quite what it is, that’s all.—The only question now is whether I’m to go with Mr. Bartholomew to Lady Haverford’s to-night.”

“I have said that I should like you to go.”

“Then what *have* we been talking about? . . .”

But thereupon, in the very moment when she had thought they had come to an understanding, he had startled her by very markedly raising his voice.

“We’ve been talking about this, Berice—that I don’t intend that either you or myself shall be talked about. Now that your name’s the same as mine I’ll have it respected. Further, I’ve tried not to bring it to this, but I want you to see that it’s a matter of my wishes, not because they’re right or wrong, but merely because they *are* my wishes. I’m a busy man, and I can’t foresee every little occasion that’s likely to arise, and so I must leave it to you to act as you think I’d wish. I put that responsibility on you.—One more thing. I don’t want to raise this subject again, and so I offer you your choice now: you can either take what I’m saying as a suggestion, a preference of mine, not formed without studying your own wishes too, or . . .”

He had left the rest unspoken, or spoken only by his extraordinarily long look. Spoken more gently, and spoken earlier, it was probably the only way with her, and she saw that, though tardily, he had found it. He did not intend to be trifled with.

And with the discovery an instant change had taken place in her. Up to then she had taken him off-handedly, hardly seriously; it was less certain that she could do so now. . . .

The clock on the drawing-room mantelpiece chimed a quarter to nine of the May evening, and with its chiming

the stopping of a hansom outside was heard. A bell rang below, and in a couple of minutes Mr. Bartholomew was announced. She had stepped from the window, not to appear to have been looking for him; she advanced to meet him.

“I’ve just been giving you a most tremendous wiggling in my thoughts,” she said. “I thought you were late.”

“No, I think I’m to time,” he replied, and added, “So your thoughts owe me an especial kindness, to make up.”

XVII

BERICE had her own explanation of her husband's attitude to the author of the *Gestes Paresseuses*. It was, simply, that in many respects the comparison was not to Harry's advantage. By the side of the poet he had befriended he was revealed as being, in many things, merely obtuse. There was no doubt that, setting aside such natural solicitude for her happiness as might be comprehended in his interpretation of the phrase 'a good husband,' he was now in the main content to possess her, and to possess her in a way not very different from the way in which he possessed his china and his *bibelots*. She was an extension of "the cleverest thing he had ever done," and he wrote off the cost of her as the price to be paid for the ownership of one more thing that justified its existence by preventing business from wholly absorbing him. He would have noticed it had she not dressed well, had she failed to do the honours of his table with grace and self-possession; but he took that for granted, as he took it for granted that his porcelains were kept free from dust and that his other rarities were advantageously displayed in their satin nests or on their cushions of velvet.

A very little would have saved her from the peril she ran. A remark now and then on even so small a matter as her attire, an occasional graceful superfluity on the manner in which she dressed her hair, would have made a very great deal of difference. But his simple, rather stupid love once granted, he owned without the fine manner of proprietorship, and already Berice knew the things it was useless to expect from him—tact, sympathy, resilience. If her nature needed these things she must look elsewhere for them. She

had found them in the man who sat side by side with her in the hansom.

For she was conscious—Bartholomew contrived it that she should be conscious—that the time she had spent at her dressing-table was not lost on him. The dark reflective eyes behind his gold-rimmed spectacles—Bartholomew never wore the pince-nez—rested on her gloves, her fan, her wrap, her shoe, critically, discriminatingly, occasionally suggesting, by a slight alteration of expression more frequently entirely approving; and it seemed to Berice that if it was worth a poet's while to pay heed to these externals it might very well not have been beneath the dignity of a banker. Any other consideration—as, for example, that there might be a *point d'appui* in not being a husband—had not for an instant occurred to her, nor had even Harry's anxious fears put it into her head.

The first time Harry had asked him to dinner she had thought how very unlike the popular conception of a poet he was to look at. He was small, blue-black, thrice-shaven, and the more given to silences the greater the number of the company he happened to be in. His tie and the ribbons of his faultless shoes seemed this evening to have been more on his mind than poetry. He wore a shirt of soft, pleated silk and did not incur the suspicion of effeminacy; the massaging of his face, had she known it, had taken an hour; and on the little finger of his right hand was a small ring with a seal-cipher of his own devising. Berice had at first guessed his age at forty; later she had learned that he was forty-seven.

He had retained the hansom he had come in rather than avail himself of Emney's car. "It isn't the car I want," he had said, deliberately seeking a safety in the boldness of the compliment. She had not replied. As the hansom sped noiselessly towards the Suspension Bridge she was thinking again of the objections Harry had been unable either to justify or to let alone.

For all her reading of them, she knew little of Bartholomew's poems. Half the happy-minded girls of the land whose fingers caressed Bartholomew's three volumes—he had

lately added the *Centamours*—knew no more than she. Their eyes, perhaps, were moist over the lines in which Bartholomew spoke of Love and Honour and Fame; but the key that would have made plain what private interpretation Bartholomew himself put upon these words was, so to speak, in a cipher of his own devising on the little finger of his right hand. Once, indeed, by an enraged husband, had Bartholomew been told to his face that his songs were the few bright weeds that floated on the surface of a black and quivering sump; and the two or three men who had heard Bartholomew's reply still remembered it.

“I'm a poet, not a spiritual adviser,” he had said in a voice that had twanged like a taut wire. “I've got my Law, and I can't help it if it's nobody else's. I don't regret one single act I've ever committed, and, as I don't judge anybody else, I don't submit myself to anybody's judgment. My Art's mine too. I don't submit that either, sir, to school-girls or weak-minded women. If they think it's harmful, let them keep out of its way. Ill answer for it to no man. But you, sir, in case you feel yourself aggrieved . . .”

The critic had had acumen, but not Bartholomew's skill as a pigeon-shot; the incident had never gone beyond private knowledge; and since, when the words Honour and Love appear frequently on a page, the public will give to the words their accepted meaning without further inquiry, Bartholomew's portrait stood on mantelpieces and on the dressing-tables of boudoirs.

Berice still remained silent and meditative as the hansom turned up Oakley Street. Her husband's concluding words that morning, that all day had lain in the background of her thoughts, more and more forced themselves forward. ‘It is a matter of my wishes because they *are* my wishes’ . . . it was the first time he had adopted that tone. ‘You can either take what I'm saying as a suggestion, or . . .’ it had been all but a menace. Yes, this was new—startlingly new. . . .

And she could not help feeling that if it was a menace it was unwise of him. That, she could have told him, was not the way to hold her. She had done nothing to earn that

markedly raised tone of voice ; she was innocent of the least unfaithful thought to him ; but she knew that it would become less easy to remain so, and she herself might lose the desire to remain so, if he dropped into the habit of challenging her thus. She hoped, for his sake as well as for her own, that he would not drop into that habit. It was not as if she could not be trusted to make only harmless friendships. . . .

The worst of it was that, despite her repeated self-assurances, she sometimes found herself struggling with a ridiculous, compunctious feeling that she was—she knew not how to put it—that she was somehow in his debt. She suppressed this feeling, yet it rose again, and ever again. It lurked in the slightest occasions ; it seized her at the least opportune moments ; she never knew when an arrow was not pointed at her and the string drawn back ; and here it was again, menacing, demanding unremitting vigilance, holding her silent in the presence of a charming companion.

And about this companion himself she was now, it appeared, called upon to make up her mind.

For she feared, she knew she feared, the tone in which Harry had spoken. If she knew anything at all of Harry, he wouldn't use it twice. He would warn her, once ; after that the responsibility would be hers. . . . Nor would the means she had several times used against him—the timely headache, the serviceable *crise*—avail her much. His career proclaimed his tenacity and hardness ; a gentler man would have found it difficult to rise as he had risen ; no : she was married to a narrow, strictly upright, possibly kind, uncomprehending, scrupulous, inflexible man, to whom she so nonsensically fancied she owed something. . . .

Well, she thought resentfully, by doing as he wished in regard to the man at her side she would be ceding nothing that she would not take good care she got back again in other ways. And, by doing as he wished, she would be putting the responsibility of the next step on him. He had better consider that. She would yield, but in a mutinous spirit. Moreover, there should be no hole-and-corner work about the business. She wouldn't be guilty of the meanness

—yes, the meanness—of letting Bartholomew think he was her friend until he should find out for himself that he was not. Harry, apparently, could not make up his mind either to a friendship or to a definite breach; well, she would make it up for him. Bartholomew should have at least that justice done him. . . . But this, Harry should understand, was not the end of it. . . .

It was with a feeling that she was giving her husband rope enough that she cast about for a means of approaching the subject.

She quickly found one. As the hansom pulled sharply up to avoid an omnibus at the crossing of the King's Road she spoke.

“Are you coming to dine with us to-morrow?” she asked.

He had not been looking at her. He did so now only for a moment, and then turned away again.

“Am I to take this as an invitation?” he said.

“Why, hasn't——” she began, and suddenly stopped. Already she had made a mistake. The opening was developing otherwise than as she had intended.

“No,” he said, smiling a little. . . .

“Oh!” she said softly. . . .

The hansom had crossed the road before he said quietly, still not looking at her, “Oh what? . . . But no; perhaps I'd better not ask you. . . .”

A little mortified, she did not reply.

But presently he gave a slight laugh. It was as if, after a good deal of guessing, he had arrived at some fully expected certitude. And he knew that if he gave that particular laugh of his at that moment she would say, “Why do you laugh?” . . .

Again she turned to him.

“Why do you laugh?” she said.

“Oh, it's nothing,” he replied.

“It was something. . . .”

He hoisted his shoulders slightly. Just as she liked—it was something, then.

“Tell me why you laughed.”

At that he spoke almost contemptuously. “You know why,” he quietly flung back.

"I really don't."

"You don't?" he said incredulously. . . . "Well, I laughed because it's just what I've been expecting. . . . But are you serious? You really *don't* know? H'm! . . . Well, if it's got to be put into words I'll explain. You ask whether I'm coming to dinner to-morrow; you'd hardly invite me to dinner yourself (that's a matter of convention, by the way—I don't say my convention); this happens to be the first word I've heard of it; and so I conclude that the matter's been mentioned and probably thought better of. Perhaps your husband won't be back by then," he added, as if, did she lack a decent reason, he would make her a present of that one.

Berice replied guardedly. That, no doubt, was the reason, she said—Harry might not be back——

"And if he is he might be tired," he further helped her.

"He's not very well," she said in a detached tone.

"No. . . . Well, it comes to the same thing, however, as it happens, for I've an engagement for to-morrow night," he remarked.

She agreed with him that in that case it was just as well, and there was a silence.

Either knew that the other was keeping something back, and presently Bartholomew laughed softly to himself again. There was power in his laugh to work on her; he knew it; and again she challenged him.

"Something really does seem to amuse you," she said.

"It does," he replied.

Then, for the first time, he turned his eyes full on her. "Come," the scornful, disillusioned eyes seemed to say, "don't pretend it doesn't amuse you too!"

"May I know the joke?" she asked, a little piqued.

"I'm afraid not," he replied. "Not that I should in the least mind telling you—and I'd tell you the truth too—but—h'm!"

As if it was not worth while to say it, he suddenly stopped. Her eyes, too, had suddenly dropped. Both understood perfectly what neither would say.

For there was no slowness at the uptake here; Bartholo-

mew, indeed, was instant at it. A glance always sufficed to tell him what Harry would only have fastened on at the end of a laborious explanation. Quick comprehension was a need of her nature; here was one who comprehended her like a flash; and it angered her that henceforth that beautiful freedom was to be foregone—foregone for the sake of an unreasonable husband and an absurd and impossible scruple. She saw, too, the way in which Bartholomew took the thing that had been no less plain to both that both had avoided it. Had he been regretful, sorrowful, forlorn . . . but he was not. He was almost contemptuous in his acquiescence. If she wanted to revive the stale comedy of the submissive wife, well and good: she must not object, however, to his having his own opinion about it. "I didn't really think you'd have the courage," his eyes said as plainly as if he had spoken the words. . . .

He did permit himself to say something of the kind in words too.

"Of course, from your point of view you're perfectly right," he said off-handedly. "If you raised hopes in me . . . but it's impossible for us to talk about it—impossible for you, that is to say——"

She was hot under the disappointed and resigned smile with which he dismissed the subject—hot with the sense, too, of her husband's injustice. Oh, yes, she promised herself, in one way or another Harry should pay for this! . . .

"And if I were to talk about it, you'd be perfectly right, of course, not to listen," he observed, with another light and philosophic shrug.

Suddenly Berice gave way to her temper. She turned crossly to look out of the window.

"Oh, it's unfair!" she broke out. "It's narrow—it's unjust! I don't think I'm unreasonable—it isn't as if I was asking for anything outrageous—surely I'm not! I only want . . . But I suppose I've got to do certain things. Well, I'll do them; but I'll be mistress of my own thoughts!"

"So?" said the Jew with amusement. . . . "Oh, I wouldn't! . . ."

"You wouldn't what? Please don't be aggravating, Mr. Bartholomew!"

"I? Not I! I'm calm enough. If I might presume to advise you, it would be that you should be the same."

"You do guess what it is, of course? . . ." She could not restrain the compromising question.

"I think so—quite nearly enough, anyway."

Again she was hot and fuming. She was less inclined than ever to leave the matter in this unsatisfactory state. Perhaps she exaggerated that mental sympathy and intuitive jumping together that seemed to exist between Bartholomew and herself; perhaps he was merely the nearest companion to hand who was not positively stupid; however that might be, it did not exonerate Harry. He was making, she repeated again, a grave mistake. . . . Petulantly she turned to Bartholomew.

"Oh, if only you'd complain—be angry—anything!" she cried.

Nothing was further from his intentions. He gave another shrug.

"Why? What's the good? There's nothing to be said," he replied with stoical indifference. "As I say, whatever *I* might do, *you* can't discuss the matter. You might have seen it all at the beginning. I did the very first time I saw you; I knew what it would be. . . . You've given yourself over—body, soul, thoughts, will, everything. When some men say 'mine,' they . . . well, they put a construction on the word that *I* shouldn't put on it. Well, well, it's the way we're made, I suppose. . . . You must excuse my amusement; I really thought all that sort of thing was out of date."

"What sort of thing?" Berice asked shortly.

"Well, I was thinking—a little by and large, if you like—of a conception of marriage. Proprietorship in bodies and souls; that's what it seems to me to come to. I really thought we'd got past all that; I'd forgotten women hadn't souls to save. H'm! Interesting. . . ." He seemed to peer at it as if it was some rare historic survival. "Of course," he continued, "you've lived in Yorkshire all your life. I

suppose that's quite enough to account for the—phenomenon—your views, I mean, if I understand them. H'm! . . . Well, it doesn't matter. I acquiesce."

"But—but——" she began.

He appeared not to hear. "Awfully interesting," he continued. "It reminds one of the days of witchcraft. I'd really no idea. . . . Two people, each with a precious life to be made the most of, go on boring one another, crossing and thwarting and stultifying one another, and stick to a long, ghastly mistake—I'm speaking generally—just because they happened once to make a small one! It's really quite fascinating. . . ."

The fascination of it seemed to send him off into a long rumination.

It was the thinnest of veils he drew over what he was doing, and he appeared only to employ it at all as a half-contemptuous concession to her obsolete prejudices. This sort of thing was a game to him, played without ruth—for stakes which she would provide. Had she known it, Berice's place was under the noiseless wheels of the hansom rather than on the seat by his side as he sat there without moving a muscle. He had no passion—all that was left to him was the desire to experience passion; no hunger—the famishing for nightingales' tongues is not hunger. He sought nothing more than sensation *as* sensation. He was *saigné à blanc*. Repletion and insatiability went in him together. In that cipher-code of his the words 'friendship' and 'gratitude' and 'trust' were capable of the interpretation he now put upon them.

And she, in allowing herself to be drawn into listening to him, was merely loosening her hold on the accepted thing without possessing the key to his private system of interpretations. She had no desire to philander; she wanted only this man's friendship—without knowing what that included; and an obstacle was put in her way. She caught sight of her own face in the little mirror at the side of the hansom: it wore the look of a woman sweetly reasonable, stupidly misunderstood. . . .

She continued to look morosely out of the window.

Suddenly she turned to Bartholomew and put a question. It was to be informed what, since he considered her own thinking inadequate, he himself thought on some point. Again the smile curved his mouth as he replied that all the world might know what he thought, since he had put his thoughts into books—

“—which evidently you haven't done me the honour to read,” he added.

“I have,” she replied, “but I don't know anything about them except that I think they're beautiful——”

The little unconscious gesture of his hands betrayed his origin as he replied.

“Well? Isn't that enough? What else is there to be known?” he asked. “I really intended nothing else. If Love is beautiful, what more can it be? What more can Life be than beautiful? I take my beauty where I find it. But I don't stick at the word if you prefer another. Call it 'interesting' if you like. Whatever you call it it's only one thing—Life, Life, Life!”

At his last words the Cromwell Road, into which they had turned, seemed suddenly to fade before Berice's eyes. In its place she saw a hot, bent-grown hillside, a fair in progress below, with rising and falling swing-boats and people moving slowly about yet ever keeping in one place, like the clusters of midges on a summer's evening. A band was playing *William Tell*, and the brazen music was calling to her in those same words: Life, Life, Life! . . .

Her marriage was to have brought her that Life; a pretty Life it seemed likely to bring her, she meditated bitterly. Harry could neither give her Life himself, nor would he allow another to do so. By what, *what* right that was not artificial did he forbid her? Was her soul not her own that he should forbid her? . . . She forgot that strictly speaking he had not forbidden her; her heart cried aloud that she would not be forbidden. She did not intend to take back anything she had given—nothing that was his should be given to anybody else—but so many things in herself were *not* his, were beyond his reach, locked in a closet to which he neither had the key nor seemed to want the key.

He was merely the dog in the manger. Bartholomew was right; women *had* souls of their own, she cried to herself, and were answerable for them. It would not be to answer for her soul to say, on some dread Day, that she had given it into somebody else's keeping. She remembered the parable of the talents. . . . Yes, there was the parable of the talents; that was a good point. Harry should have the parable of the talents quoted to him—for certainly, certainly, she intended to have all this up again. . . .

And more than all else she envied this man at her side something of which he had once boasted to her—his immunity from regrets for anything he had ever done. She wished . . . not, of course, on any special account . . . oh, no . . . but still she wished that *she* could say that. It must be a comfortable thing to be able to say, that was all. . . . She did not know that she was sound and wholesome only in proportion as she had *not* that immunity, nor that with it she would have been as corrupt as he. . . .

She resumed her frowning stare out of the window.

But they were getting near their destination, and for the present only one thing was to be done. She would have it up again with Harry, but in the meantime she had a wholesome fear of that which she had seen in his face when he had so unexpectedly raised his voice to her. She turned to Bartholomew with a sigh.

"I'm sorry," she said.

He seemed to take it calmly.

"Perhaps you're prudent. That—prudence—isn't a thing I should allow to dictate my actions altogether, but it's your own affair—or rather it *isn't* exactly your own affair. Of course, it will make a good deal of difference to me; I shall be losing something I've come to think—well, a good deal of; but you needn't consider that. If it comes to the worst I'll just take myself off somewhere. That'll leave you entirely—h'm!—I was going to say 'free.' . . ."

Again, to all outward appearances motionless, he sat strongly willing her to him.

She found it touching. She thought she saw through the restraint of his demeanour. He was not letting her see the

depth of his wound. It was fine of him. She knew that he never used the word 'friendship' without paying homage to it; as for private interpretations, she did not even know he had any; and their friendship, it appeared, had progressed so far that, for him, a breach of it meant 'taking himself off somewhere.' . . .

"Yes, that will be the best," he repeated, as if to himself, "the best for both of us. . . ."

"I shall speak to him again," she said in a low voice.

"Ah, don't do that. I don't know what he's been saying about me, but"—this time he gave the veil a little twitch aside—"I don't want to say anything about him——"

"But I must," she interposed quickly. "I can't be owned and possessed like this——"

He was about to reply, but at that moment the hansom stopped at the end of a string of vehicles that, with stoppings and startings forward again, approached a striped awning that had been built out over the pavement. They ceased to talk. Not until a tall man, helping a lady to alight from the cab immediately ahead, turned and raised his hat to Berice, did Bartholomew speak again. The tall man was Murragh Neill.

"Who's that?"

She told him.

"Ah, yes, the sculptor. . . . Somebody was talking to me about him the other day; who was it, now? . . . Keigwyn, perhaps; probably Keigwyn; he'd met some man or other . . . but here we are."

He assisted Berice from the hansom, and they followed Neill and his companion up the carpeted steps.

XVIII

AT the head of the stairs Lady Haverford greeted her guests with a little ceaseless rill of prattle. She took Berice's hand.

"... I quite understand, my dear; these busy men! And we mayn't even hope to see him later, when the theatre party comes? No? I'm so sorry!—Charming Mrs. Emney looks, Mr. Bartholomew! . . . Ah, here's Murragh Neill and his fiancée—sweet of you to come, Mrs. Enright!—Murragh, I've a crow to pluck with you presently. . . ."

The large room on the first floor was already half full. The restive tunings of a white-jacketed band mingled with the talk and laughter of the groups that stood or moved under the crystal bouquets, softly showering light, of the two matchless chandeliers. Here and there a collar or pendant or suddenly-flashing comb rippled back the light with the movement of the wearer as light is rippled from the fringes of an April rain; the passing dark figures of the men made a restless counterchange; and the long, pilaster-like curtains of the tall windows led the eye up to the upper spaces of a tableau in the older manner, before the figure became so importunately the whole of the composition.

There ran across the room to Berice, all slender shoes and upcaught cascades of petticoats, three girls. Lady Haverford, the precise degree of whose cousinship to Sir John Hartopp Berice was always on the point of understanding yet ever missing again, had made her party serve the pleasant little by-end of bringing certain of Berice's older friends together again, and Emily Tracy was there, and both the Howitt girls, and others. Berice ran forward to meet them, and an old general, hearing the little fusillade of kisses behind

him, turned, laughed, and said, "Your bevy, Hartopp, I think?" . . .

The noise broke out through the general hum as a fountain might splash out among wavelets.

"It's Berice—how jolly!—"

"And married! . . . I don't suppose you could make out one word of my letter, for Mary there—listen, Berice—that Mary—"

"I didn't!"

"You did! She fought with me for the pen, and I tried to turn her out of my room—"

"Emily!—"

"She did, didn't she, Alice?—"

"It was *you* said about Bunny!—"

"—and she wouldn't go to her own bed, and you know what mine's like—"

"You know what *she's* like!—"

"Is he here, Berice? Oh, do let's go somewhere where we can talk! If only you could have been with us in Norway!—"

"Ssh, Mary! You know—"

"Of course; I'd forgotten . . . poor Lionel!—"

"Oh, do come over here and have five minutes' talk all to ourselves before . . ."

"You dears!" said Berice, with shining eyes. . . .

The little gale of talk passed away across the room, and Bartholomew heard the general's laugh and remark, "*Our* sex isn't wanted there just at present!"

Bartholomew detested dancing merely as dancing; the explosion of the group that had abandoned him had set other tongues wagging more freely; and the conductor of the white-jacketed band had tapped with his baton. In order that he should not be engaged until he desired, the poet approached a lady who no longer danced, and consented to have the beauties of his own verse explained to him. A couple or two had circled out over the shining floor; others joined them; the floor beat to a perceptible pulse; and presently the inverted shimmering of the chandeliers could be seen only intermittently among the nimble feet and the swinging skirts of the women.

Bartholomew sustained his share of the conversation with his partner by means of monosyllables. His eyes scarcely wandered from one direction—the direction of the sofa beyond banked azaleas, under the high, pilaster-like curtains, where the four girls still kept their partners waiting. He watched and chafed. He didn't care a rush about her girl friends. Bother her girl friends! He wanted to know about the *men* she had known—her husband, Neill, this Bunny, whoever he was, that the girl in blue had mentioned, any others. . . .

“So few men understand the woman's point of view” . . . , his companion was laying it on with a trowel. . . .

“Do you mean so few express it?” said Bartholomew, his mind elsewhere. . . .

The good soul found him charming. . . .

But suddenly he excused himself and rose. Sir John Hartopp had borne blusteringly down on the group beyond the azaleas, clapping his hands, and the girls had broken and fled. In a moment Bartholomew was at Berice's side, offering her his arm. She placed her hand upon it, gave a laugh and a nod over her shoulder, and they slid into the dance.

Her frock was of white satin, overwebbed with a slender mesh of the same pale low gold as her hair; and she was still lightly tanned and faintly freckled as low as the small Florentine pendant at her throat. Below the pendant was milk-white flesh. Even his tired pulse had almost given a throb that was not artificial. . . . Her hand rested in his, but he set his teeth together and made no sign. To have made a sign would have been to play a different game altogether—a game common by comparison. . . .

Half-way round the room he spoke.

“I've remembered who it was who spoke of Neill the other day. It *was* Keigwyn. Or rather, somebody had been speaking of him to Keigwyn. He's been doing a bust or something of the sort down in your part of the world, hasn't he?”

For a moment, as Berice's startled eyes swept the room, the waltz seemed to quicken. Then all was as before.

“Mr. Neill? Yes,” she said.

“ I suppose that was where you met him ? ”

“ Yes. He stayed with Sir John Hartopp.”

“ So Keigwyn gave me to understand.”

Her throat felt a trifle tight, and she was conscious of an uneasy desire to talk about something else.

“ I don't know him,” she said, looking elsewhere.

But that beginning was as good as many others, and better than some, to him. He smiled.

“ Keigwyn or Neill? Keigwyn, of course. . . . No, I hardly supposed you would. He's a fine artist, but—well, it's a queer mixed life, this of writing and painting. Men get jumbled together, all sorts. You've got to take the good stuff where you can find it—I'm making a social suggestion, of course. We all meet on the common ground of our work.”

“ You mean he's not—beautiful? ” she said, remembering his dictum.

“ His work is,” Bartholomew replied, with amused reserve. He was thinking of a dancing-room very different from Lady Haverford's. This other dancing-room, the “ Schleswig,” had a bar at one end, a supper-table with a cheap cloth over a marbled top at the other, and one smoked where one chose. Men did get ‘ jumbled together ’ at the “ Schleswig ”—broken men, men too weakly good or undistinguishedly bad for society's endurance, plucked, blackballed, ‘ gone-under ’ men. Five hundred pounds could be quickly spent at the “ Schleswig.” Keigwyn was ‘ Keggie ’ there. . . .

“ And by the way,” Bartholomew continued, “ wasn't it of some young fellow who died out in India that Neill did that bust? Keigwyn mentioned the name, but I've forgotten it; I think it was Lionel something——”

The sharpness with which she took in her breath was audible. He heard it, and continued without a pause.

“ —possibly the Lionel of whom your friend was speaking a little while ago——”

She began to repeat the words after him, but she did not finish the repetition.

“ The Lionel . . . oh, please take me to a seat—I've turned dizzy.”

He had felt the spasmodic clutch of her hand; it had

followed his words with the promptitude with which an exposed nerve starts at the touch of an instrument. . . . They were near the sofa behind the azaleas ; if, as he led her to it, he made a quick mental note, his face did not betray him ; there was nothing on it but concern as he saw her seated and then bent over her with solicitude.

“ Oh, dear ! ” he said in perturbed tones. . . . “ What is it ? I’m so sorry ! . . . Can I get you anything ? ”

He remarked—he missed nothing—that she had changed colour and closed her eyes. Her lips moved.

“ No—no—I shall be all right in a minute or two—it’s nothing—please leave me alone for a few minutes——”

“ Do you mean not talk to you—— ? ”

“ Leave me altogether, please——”

With another look of concern he bowed and did so.

But he did not go far. Placing himself near the palms that banked the music-dais he watched her covertly. From the very first he did not believe in this sudden faintness of hers. She had changed colour, but that, he was sure, was not illness. It was not a matter of course with Bartholomew that he took the word of man or woman merely because it was passed, and he had felt that quick involuntary grip of her hand. Had anything he had said been the cause of it ? He was trying to remember what he had said. . . .

But nothing he remembered furnished any explanation. The whole occurrence was rather odd. He stood there, musing, watching, wondering, trying this solution and that. . . .

And she ? She sat stupid, dazed, unstrung. No more than he could she have told exactly what ailed her. It was not entirely at that quick upstarting of a name that her throat had grown tight and her knees had threatened to fail her ; she was inured to the upstarting of that name : that upstarting, it seemed, came all in the chances of the day ; this was something else. She, too, as she sat there, hidden from the dancers by the bank of azaleas, was trying to remember words—trying to remember what had immediately preceded the mention of that name. . . .

After a moment she did remember : Keigwyn . . . Keig-

wyn, whoever he was, had said something to Bartholomew on which, unless she had imagined this, Bartholomew had dwelt a little. For some reason or other Bartholomew a little flashed something before her eyes for which apparently the name of Keigwyn stood. Why did he do so? Who, after all, was this Keigwyn? What had Keigwyn said that Bartholomew should assume her interest in? And who (she remembered this) had been speaking to Keigwyn about Neill's work, and why? . . . The old defensive habit stirred again. She was vaguely uneasy. She had asked to be led to a seat, not because any bolt had pierced her to the centre, but in order that she might be alone for a moment and think.

For the habit of thought was fastened upon her, and she must think. If for no other reason than common prudence she must find out what, if anything, was in Bartholomew's mind. Though she ran the risk of creating a suspicion, where at present none existed, she dared not leave things as they stood. And in order to find out that she must find out first who this Keigwyn was, and how the name of Lionel Finch-Ommaney had come to be on the lips of a man whose name she had heard barely twice. . . .

Yes, and upon those of another man, apparently, to whom she could not even affix a name in her thoughts. . . .

And if in all this she was going over old ground again, it was with at least the illusion of newness. For the circumstances of her life had changed, and, though Life had still not given her all she demanded of it, it had, even in seven or eight months, undeniably opened out in many ways. For eight weeks at least she had travelled; comparatively recent scenes and memories, already becoming blurred and indistinct, had yet left a general and permanent impression of enlarged horizons; and, more important still, she had moved among people whose ideas, whether better or worse, were not the ideas of Cotterdale and Ridsdale.—Yes, innumerable new modifications were now to be applied to that old central fact of her life. There were, she knew, men and women in the world—in that very room, perhaps—who, had it been suggested to them that that thrice-sterilized

ghost could still affright her, would have opened a quizzical eye, stared, asked whether she was serious, and probably have laughed outright at the humour of the notion. One of these, for that matter, had just left her side. . . .

For a new spirit was abroad, that dealt with such things with a lenience infinitely taking and sympathetic. The novels she had already read, the plays she had already seen, even fragments of discussion she had already heard, told her that. And she was twenty-eight—no child—and sorely ached for the things with which this New Spirit went attended.

For it was an enlightened and a humane and a boundlessly charitable spirit. It mitigated the hardness and severity of things, and made little deprecating hushings-up when inconvenient questions of merely mundane significance were raised. Those who preached its doctrine declared with irresistible candour that they made no pretence to an impossible austerity, and smiled without too much display of natural satisfaction when those who did came a cropper. "See," they said, "we are not a scrap worse than anybody else really—and think how much to the good we are in charity, in gentleness, and in not blaming a single one of God's creatures!" . . . Laws, they said, were made for man, and not man for laws. All laws, they said, must bow before the strong soul; and souls of precisely the required degree of strength flocked to the standard. . . .

And who, when these closed up shoulder to shoulder in the forefront of revolt, had the right to say that they would not have been found in the van had duty and inclination not gone hand in hand? Because ease and all-round pleasantness could be shown to accrue, was the divinity of the gospel to be doubted? No, no, no. They were reformers, these, marching to a clearer day. Beautiful names were woven into their banners. And if here or there a feeble or erotic mind was to be found in that brave band, what holy cause may not suffer that derogation?

And how if this new and merciful spirit were able to show that that which for so long Berice had considered an error was in truth no error at all, but a stirring towards emancipa-

tion, a breaking of an unnatural bond, and a challenge to tyranny? . . . Ah, if that spirit could show *that*, how Berice's heart would go out to it! That would be release—rebirth—Life!

And there was Bartholomew, the man who could teach her, standing near the musicians, waiting for her. She remembered Keigwyn again. . . . It became exciting. It became almost breathlessly exciting when she remembered, too, that in order to find out what all this about Keigwyn meant she must match her wits against the poet's—must get something out of him while giving nothing away herself. In any case it was with Harry's consent that they were here together this evening; she would make the most of that; she would pump the poet now. . . . Her heart thumped; she closed her eyes for a moment; then she opened them again and looked round.

He was at her side instantly.

"Are you better?" he murmured.

"I felt suddenly giddy."

"Hadn't you better drink something?"

"Perhaps it would be better."

"Shall I bring it to you here, or will you come downstairs?"

"I'll come downstairs," Berice said.

She rose. They glided through the dancers and passed down the wide staircase to the supper room.

The supper room was a pink twilight of shaded candles, with soft gleams of glass and napery and flowers, and it was empty. At the farther end of it was a small alcove the curtain of which Bartholomew held aside; but she had already sat down at one of the small tables. He took a spike and a napkin and opened a bottle of champagne; she half-emptied her glass at a draught, and he filled it again. A maid appeared, but at a word from him retired again.

The significance of Bartholomew's beginnings rarely appeared until his end was in sight, and then it was usually to be seen that his plan had been of a piece all along. He began significantly now.

"Won't you come in here, where you can close your eyes

without being seen by anybody who comes in?" he said, again indicating the alcove with his eyes. "We shall be missed anyhow, and we may as well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb," he added.

"Hanged?" she said. . . .

"Do you doubt it?" he merely replied. . . .

He had filled his own glass at the same time as hers, but he made no motion to touch its contents. Indeed, he rarely drank, and was far from wishing to drink now. Drink was all very well for Keigwyn at the "Schleswig," but Bartholomew tasted Life with a more sensitive palate. He studied her face covertly, and presently again made a remark the significance of which he left to appear in the fullness of time.

"Oh, yes, we shall be hanged—you see the way things are going, and know that as well as I do. Any reason, or none at all, will do; this is probably our last *tête-à-tête*. I must respect your wish."

She did not notice that already it was he, not she, who was taking a lead that she might find it a little difficult to regain. She replied disclaimingly.

"My wish? . . . If you mean the continuance of our friendship, it's no wish of mine!"

"Oh, pardon me!" He apologized that he should have to differ.

"How mine?"

"Ah, that!—" His shrug put the responsibility of answering *that* question on her.

"Do you mean—"

"I mean," he interrupted, "that the only thing that could save you from the hanging I spoke of you don't seem—happily for you, perhaps—you don't seem to have got."

"What's that?" she demanded.

He made a deprecating "Tut, tut! . . . You don't mean you want me to tell you!"

"Oh, yes, I do," she replied.

His smile said, "Come, come—that's rather too much!"

"Certainly I want you to tell me," she said again.

"Oh, very well, but I shall have to do so in my own words,

and you'll have to take the risk of misunderstanding them. It's a question of—of moral terminology, you see. If I were to say you lacked courage you'd probably throw some marital virtue or other at my head, and we should be both meaning the same thing really." Again it was as if he snapped his fingers softly at the multitude of things he denied. Even in the way in which he abstained from using her married name there was a subtle claim—at least the negative claim that if he might not have what he wanted he refused to accept anything less. She felt that if she was to match her wits against his now was the time. It was not now their menaced friendship she wished to hear about, but Keigwyn. She took up his last remark—took up the glove he had nonchalantly tossed down before her.

"I didn't know we were discussing myself and my qualities," she said. "I'm afraid they're very poor material."

Again came the smile. "Not at all. . . . Do you forbid discussion of ourselves?"

No, she didn't forbid that, she said. She felt that to forbid that might in the result be but a poor way of getting information out of him. . . .

"Then why the remark?"

She offered to withdraw the remark if he wished. . . .

"Oh, no. Let's go on. I should like to be able to flatter myself that you didn't find me dull; I, at any rate, find you interesting," he said, his eyes paying her the compliment that to interest him was no trifle. He meant that he found his sensations in her presence interesting.

She inclined her head.

"You're very good," she said demurely. "But mayn't we talk about the things *I* find interesting?"

"You've only to name them. . . ." It was an instant and gallant gesture he made. He noted that her sickness appeared entirely to have left her.

"Well," slightly elaborately, she appeared to be revolving a number of more or less interesting topics, "anything will do really that isn't quite stale to me. What were we talking about before? Mr. Keigwyn, wasn't it? He'll do as well as anything else. . . ."

He had quite indescribably the air of making a swift note. He gazed into his full champagne glass. . . .

"I wonder what it is you find interesting about Keigwyn? He'd be flattered——" he remarked.

"Oh, I don't know," she said airily. "Why is anything interesting, for that matter?"

His reply was to look long, deeply, familiarly into her eyes. He had not forgotten Keigwyn, but Keigwyn could wait for a few minutes: he had something else to do for the moment—to test that 'courage' of hers of which he had spoken. He continued to look. . . .

The result of his testing appeared in the dry, corrosive laugh with which he dropped his eyes again.

"Oh, dear!" he murmured to his glass of lifeless champagne—he had already filled hers again, and again it was half empty. "Is it as bad as all that?"

This was unexpected, and found her a little abroad. "As bad as all what?" she demanded. "Is what as bad?"

"I mean," he murmured, still to the glass, the stem of which his fingers were lightly tapping, "is your hus—well, say your life—so uninteresting that anything whatever would be a relief?"

She frowned a little. "You were going to say my husband," she said.

"H'm! . . . Well? . . ." he said quietly.

"You were . . ."

"Well? . . . What then?"

Her next words came an hour or two too late. "Well—we'll leave that out, I think."

But he looked suddenly up. An open guffaw could hardly have been more mocking than his smile.

"Really?" he said, looking into her eyes again. "*Now?* . . . Do you mean—do you actually mean—that we've been absolutely misunderstanding one another for the last hour and a half?"

This time her eyes fell in confusion. . . . It *had* been so. They *had* been discussing her husband—or he had, and she had listened—rather freely. But that, bad enough, seemed somehow worse when it was given the open recognition

Bartholomew gave it. Imperceptibly her sense of injustice and tyranny had led her into it, and now Bartholomew had flicked pretence aside. It had not occurred to her—in this instance at any rate—that it is easier to admit somebody into your life than to thrust that person out again. She coloured faintly.

“Well, we can stop now,” she said abruptly.

He showed himself excellent, immediate, entirely at her least reasonable disposal. Since she did not wish it. . . . He bowed suavely and indifferently. “I beg your pardon if I have. . . . Shall we go upstairs again?” He made a movement as if he only waited for her to rise.

But she did not rise. To go upstairs again would hardly serve her purpose. She had not yet as much as begun to find out what she wanted to know; and vaguely she began to see that so far he had had the direction of their conversation. This would never do. . . . Again she sipped from her glass, and put up her hand as he made as if once more to replenish it.

“No more, thank you; it will be getting into my head. . . . I don’t think, Mr. Bartholomew,” she said slowly, “you understand me as well as you seemed to. For instance, you said a little while ago that I’d lived in Yorkshire the greater part of my life. Well, so I have. I was hoping you’d understand the limited point of view of the simple village maiden; but I—I really don’t think you do.”

He tapped his fingers in time to the waltz that set the ceiling overhead slightly palpitating; then, looking up for a moment, he asked if there were no experiences to be had in Yorkshire.

“Yes, yes,” she said, with a little wave of her hand, “but that’s not what I mean. Life’s life everywhere, of course; but you won’t pretend that there isn’t a wider life than that.”

“Keigwyn’s?” he suggested a little maliciously. . . .

“Please don’t be ridiculous. . . .”

“Well,” he resumed presently, “if it’s your village-maiden innocence, as you call it, that requires enlightening, I dare say at a pinch I could do it. . . . Anything you like to ask me. . . .”

A willingness on Bartholomew's part to be questioned categorically was hardly characteristic of him unless he wished to inspire confidence or to allay suspicion. Moreover, to be told, lacking a clue, to go ahead with your questioning is only a little less embarrassing than to be refused altogether. He saw her half-vexed smile, and, expertly taking her measure, quite confident that the more she said the more game she would be likely to start, yielded with an indulgent laugh.

"I see," he said. "You mean you're having rather a dull time . . . but I beg your pardon; that's taboo.—Say, then, that you want to know things, and don't quite know what they are. Well, neither do I; to be asked to talk about Life at large is rather a big order. Let me see: how did we come to be talking about this at all? . . . Ah, yes: Neill; we began with Neill. I was saying that Keigwyn had been saying that some man or other had been saying (it's a little involved—I hope you follow it) that Neill had been doing a bust—I think it was a bust—of some fellow, I fancy his name was Lionel, who had died in India. (There, I've said it, but please don't ask me to repeat it!) . . . Well, and so you want to know about this wonderful Keigwyn. . . ."

He proceeded to tell her a number of things about Keigwyn that were entirely wide of any purpose whatever. She for her part feigned a charming candour and interest, and put questions and made comments that were equally beside the mark. The waltz upstairs had ceased, and the band had dashed off the peremptory summons to the Lancers. . . .

"I'm telling you all this," he broke off after a further recital to say, "but it's merely because you ask it. I really don't quite see where the interest comes in. . . ."

It was true; he did not; but he saw clearly enough that it *had* an interest for her. Perhaps even then—since we all interpret others according to what we find in ourselves—he was making swift mental fetches. But he took care that she should not see that. . . .

"I said before," he continued, glancing up at the ceiling for a moment as the masculine thud that introduces the Ladies' Chain shook it, "that we—we writers and sculptors and so on—meet on the common ground of our work. Neill's

too good a man, of course, for anything he does to pass unnoticed. *Ergo*, this friend of Keigwyn's, a sculptor himself for anything I know, finding a genuine signed Neill in an out-of-the-way country church, spreads the news among other sculptors, and—and there you are. . . .”

“It's—it's awfully interesting,” she murmured absently. A sculptor naturally takes an interest in a brother sculptor's work, but it had not been by a sculptor that the last comment on that memorial she had heard had been made. . . . “I suppose it's because Harry only cares about the other side of all this sort of thing that I find their actual lives so interesting. . . .”

And the more *he* saw of it, the more interesting he, too, found it; but he only said “Not at all”—vowed that more commonplace gossip had never passed his lips. Actually he was beginning to tingle with the interest of it. This superb creature of pale gold and the tan of the sun actually had the assurance to pump him—him of all men: he knew it, and enjoyed it richly. . . .

“By the way,” he remarked casually, after a silence, “I suppose the bust *is* of this Lionel, whoever he was?”

“Yes,” she said, her fingers playing with the stem of the glass from which she had again sipped. . . .

“What was his other name?” . . .

From upstairs floated the strains of a two-step; gently she moved the champagne glass in time to it. She continued this for a moment; then she answered, without a tremor of her voice or the flicker of a lid:

“His name was Lionel Finch-Ommaney. He was a lieutenant in the Malverns. He was killed on shooting-leave. The Finch-Ommaneys are neighbours of ours.”

Bartholomew nodded. All that he said was “Poor chap.” . . . His fingers were at his own glass, moving it this way and that on the table. He seemed to be in a reverie. . . . By the time he had come out of the reverie his full glass stood beside her own almost empty one.

Then suddenly he looked up.

“Will you introduce me to Neill?” he asked. “He doesn't know it, but I'm a great admirer of his, and I should

like to ask him about what, I don't doubt, is a fine piece of work."

She was beginning to reply "With pleas——" but all in a moment a swift thought came to her. That thought opened up a prospect entirely new—made an arrangement of the parts of the kaleidoscope that no former turn of the instrument had effected. That new combination must be examined. . . . "With pleasure," she said more slowly; and then proceeded to examine the possibilities of the new turn. . . .

Instantly she was uncomfortable. If she brought Neill and Bartholomew together there was the chance—the improbability, perhaps, but still the chance—that Neill might unwittingly drop an indicative word. He would not make free with her name; there was no fear of that; still, her name *might* be mentioned, and it is no great lapse in honour to say of a woman that she is magnificent. And Bartholomew, whose finger she had now begun to feel, as it were, making slight palpitations upon her pulse, seeking outlying arteries, would probably agree that she was magnificent. . . . She did not mistrust Bartholomew; nevertheless, magnificence with Neill and magnificence with a man who justified all things by beauty and interest were likely to have meanings the difference of which it would be unsafe to ignore. Even where she had no reason for mistrust she meant to keep everything, down to the very last detail, entirely and absolutely in her own so capable hands. . . .

"With pleasure," she murmured again, inwardly resolved that, if she could compass it, Neill should remain for the rest of the evening at one end of the ballroom and Bartholomew at the other.

"Thank you," he said.

She had pushed back her chair, as if to rise, but suddenly, at a word from him, she stopped. "What?" she said; and "Eh? I beg your pardon," he said, in the same moment.

"What did you say?"

Bartholomew murmured.

"I said, 'Poor chap.' The youngster, I mean.—I suppose he was quite young?"

"Not twenty-seven."

"Sad. Did Neill know him?"

"I think not. . . . No, I mean."

"H'm! . . . Then it was odd he should take a cobbler's job like that on. It's really not like him. He's rather scrupulous in such matters, if all accounts are true."

Berice had again pushed back her chair and risen. It had occurred to her suddenly, oddly suddenly, that they had been absent from the ballroom a long time. They were playing another waltz now. . . . And all at once she felt that she wanted to be rid for the present of Bartholomew. His last words, though he of course did not know it, had shown her the danger-light again. . . . She answered at random.

"I believe Mr. Neill is scrupulous in all matters. I—I like him." It was true that with her marriage much of her resentment against Neill had passed.

"Yes, yes," he said absently, not immediately rising, though she stood. . . .

No more than she did he intend to betray his real thought. This was once more about the *men* she might have known. . . . It was laid down as an axiom in the *Centamours* that 'never *may* mean once, but that once *always* means twice and thrice'; and the *Centamours* contained the suspect whole of him. If there *was* some man, not her husband? . . . It was not Neill—he had seen Neill. A 'Bunny' had been mentioned—it might be he. Or it might, if Bartholomew had luck, be this other. . . . A bow can always be drawn at a venture, hitting if it hits, if it misses meaning nothing. The faintest throb of the minor arteries on which he now had a sensitive finger would be traceable to head-quarters. That she was not unwilling, in spite of her rising, to continue their talk was shown by the fact that she had sat slowly down again, as if she realized for some private reason or other that matters could not now be left at the present juncture. . . . He would draw the bow. . . .

"No doubt you liked the other one too?" he said, his eyes sensitive past all description to read the minutest symptom of betrayal. . . .

It had hit. Some of the contents of the glass she was in

the act of once more lifting to her lips spilled ; the rest set her coughing. . . .

“ You did ? ” he repeated in a voice the perfect control of which astonished himself. The words were hardly a question. . . .

Then in a flash, the swiftness of which was only increased by the wine she had drunk, she saw the truth—that in a contest of wits and persistence she had no more chance with him than the coursed rabbit has against the whippet. Her breath had suddenly come short and agitatedly again, so that his thought, as he watched her, was “ Ill again ! ” . . . What was she to do ? . . . Denial, after that swift involuntary betrayal, would not, she knew, be believed ; indifference also was not credible ; and the possibilities of a meeting with Neill that she might not be able to prevent were an unknown quantity. There was only one thing to do—it was the most hazardous of all, but there was nothing else—already he was awaiting her reply, and but making answers of his own for every moment she delayed—he must be given to understand exactly what Neill had been given to understand . . . nothing more nor less. . . .

“ I’m sorry if I’ve trespassed——” he was beginning in a sympathetic murmur. . . .

Her head fell. She sobbed out the words in a low voice.

“ Oh, I—I thought too much of him ! Of course, you saw—I tried to keep it from you—you see, you see—oh, let us go !——”

She covered her eyes with her hand.

It was all he wanted. His manner was now one of almost reverent respect for her emotion. A minute or two passed ; then, with a nervous little laugh, she lifted her head again.

“ You must think me very ridiculous——”

What he thought was his own affair. He murmured soothingly.

“ Hush—oh, I almost said ‘ Hush, dear woman ! ’ Perhaps I understand. Rest for a moment ; then we’ll join the others——”

“ One minute——”

“Yes, just sit quiet. I won’t speak.—I wouldn’t drink any more of that champagne if I were you; have some coffee instead. Shall I ask one of your friends to come down to you? . . .”

He could afford to leave her now. He had had his sensation, and, unless all indications were wrong, knew in what direction to look for others. That by and by. . . .

“I’ll send your friend in pale blue to you,” he murmured, bending so closely over her head that he suddenly thought it prudent to recover himself. “You’ll be all right until she comes? I’ll say you’re not well . . . and that will explain too . . . in case you’ve been missed. . . .”

At the door he turned to look back at her. Her face was exquisite in the rosy penumbra of the candle shades, and her shoulders dazzling. Her chin was in her hands, and she was gazing fixedly under the satin rim at the flame of the candle. She did not turn her head, but she was still conscious of his presence, for she made a slight gesture, a scarcely perceptible gesture, inflaming to him, of the whole of her body rather than of any part of it, as if to say, “Go now.” He obeyed. . . .

Berice danced again and again that night, but only once more with Bartholomew. Except for that once he did not ask her. Nor was his talk, either then or later, in the hansom, as he took her back home, more than casual gossip of the dance—of her friends, of Mrs. Enright, Neill’s betrothed (Neill had presented her to Berice, praying to be allowed to call on her and her husband), and of the later arrivals of the theatre party. Then, as the hansom slipped through the deserted streets, he ceased to talk at all. They stopped at her home. Bartholomew held the gate open for her, found her key, but did not set foot into the garden. “Good night, and thank you,” she said, giving her hand, and he stood at the gate until the door should have closed behind her. It did close, and he got into the hansom again.

“Right,” he said to the driver. . . .

And “Right” he said reflectively to himself. . . .

XIX

THAT prolonged absence of Berice and Bartholomew from Lady Haverford's ballroom did not improve matters at the house on the Embankment—for some busybody who saw no harm in anything at all (it was the lady who had pointed out the beauties of Bartholomew's poems to their author, and she had called at the tea hour one afternoon when Harry was at home) must needs refer to the matter between two jests on "the protracted Emney honeymoon," as she called Berice's relations with her husband. And as luck had it, her harmless communication fell unfortunately in respect of a certain statement Berice had to make of her views on the subject of marriage when it became tyranny. . . . From this statement she was careful not to omit the parable of the talents. . . .

Emney listened patiently. He was not sure he quite understood her. . . .

"Your own life?" he repeated after her. "You wish to live it? . . . Well, what is there to prevent you?"

She was careful not to mention Bartholomew's name. "Nothing in particular—nothing I can put my finger on, I suppose," she admitted. "But I want you to see my view of it. For instance, it might be a question of the friendships I should like to make."

"Your friendships? . . . Dearest, when have I tried to come between you and your friendships? You have all the friends you ever had—the Tracys, the Howitts, Miss Dickenson and the rest—and you've made a number of others——"

"Oh, those, of course—women——"

It was almost equivalent to mentioning the name she had just foregone, but he made no remark. He frowned a

little and stroked his moustache quickly, but spoke with patience.

“Who else do you want, Berice? I really don't want to stand in your way.”

His reasonableness sometimes made her more exasperated than did his opposition. It was so now.

“It's more a question of whom I might possibly want,” she returned. “To tell the truth, I don't know. It's simply that I might.”

“Well, can't we talk of it when you do know? What's the good of meeting trouble half way?”

“Why 'trouble'?” she asked.

“Oh, I don't mean 'trouble,' of course. I mean any little difficulty or anything that might arise. I've got to speak in 'mights' too, you see.”

“What you mean is, that you might object?”

“Certainly there might be circumstances in which I should think it my duty to object—but that again is only a 'might.'”

There was a silence. This was after dinner, in their own home, and they still sat at the table. Suddenly he leaned across the corner of the table and took her hand. She suffered the fondling laxly.

“Dear wife,” he said, “the last thing I want is to seem rigorous, but—well, you've really no idea how inexperienced you are. I wish you'd sometimes admit—just once in a way, as a possibility—that I know more about the world than you do.”

His voice was earnest. His love and pride in her were none the less that he did not always jump at her meanings. Again he caressed her reluctant hand.

“Oh, of course, you may have seen more than I have; I dare say you have; but that's not what I'm talking about. In a sense, that only makes it worse. It's a question of points of view.”

He nodded.

“I quite see that. But you seem suddenly to have picked up a new one.”

“Not suddenly.”

“Well, we'll say you've got a new one.”

“ Perhaps not altogether new either.”

“ Then why this sudden manifestation of it, my dear ? ”

She chafed, and withdrew her hand from his.

“ It’s—it’s—well, if I must tell you the truth, things aren’t turning out altogether as I thought they would,” she broke out.

He sought to recapture her hand. “ Then let’s make them do so, dearest—let’s make them do so,” he besought her tenderly.

“ Oh,” she cried petulantly, “ I don’t know whether we *can*—I don’t really believe we can. I’m not sure that we haven’t made——”

But he did not allow her to add the words “ a mistake.” He came round the table, slipped to his knees, and put his arms about her waist. His face was turned upwards imploringly.

“ What, not your husband, Berice ? Not your husband who loves you ? ” he pleaded.

“ Oh, I know all that,” she said, closing her eyes as if she found his affection rather tiresome. “ Of course you’re my husband. But sometimes you seem to forget the terms we married on.”

“ That I was to make you love me if I could ? . . . Ah, let me, let me !——”

“ That—and that I was to be allowed some degree of freedom.”

He seemed bewildered. . . .

“ But, my darling, you *have* it ! What more freedom do you want ”

She released herself from his embrace and rose.

“ I haven’t it, Harry ; it’s idle to say I have. I can’t begin to give instances ; the whole thing becomes ridiculous looked at in that way ; it isn’t in any single thing—it runs through everything. I’ve the feeling you’re checking me, holding me in. I know you don’t do it deliberately ; I don’t think you’re always conscious when you do it ; and very likely it’s all my fault. But we’re simply not the same kind. We can’t help it now, of course, either of us ; but we’ve been married long enough to know something of each

other, and it seems to me that if we've made a mistake we ought to look it squarely in the face."

He, too, had risen, and had placed himself on the hearth-rug. His hands were deep in his trousers pockets, and he was looking at her with his head slightly forward.

"A mistake, Berice?" he said slowly.

"If we have, I say."

"If we have. . . . Darling, isn't this just the way to make it one?"

"Oh, I said it was very likely all my fault."

Her tone took back any admission there was in the words. She was exasperated. Even his attitude on the hearthrug was that of proprietorship—not even sultanic, but rather stupidly owning. And the beginnings of a frown had now gathered on his brow.

"I didn't want to speak of this again," he said slowly, "but you force me to it, Berice. . . . Tell me who's been putting all this nonsense into your head. Is it that fellow Bartholomew?"

She lifted her head. "That again? . . . You seem unable to leave him out of it."

"He seems to thrust himself into it," he replied, the frown deepening.

"Whether he does or not you seem to seize on it as if it afforded you some satisfaction. I don't want to come between you and anything it's pleasant for you to think, however ridiculous it is; so have it so if you like. . . . Only let me point out that with a little reasonableness all this could be avoided."

He took a stride forward from the hearthrug. "A little reasonableness!" he began; and then again he checked himself and spoke more quietly. "Listen, Berice," he said. "As I say, I didn't want to mention this, but perhaps after all I owe it to you. I'll tell you, then, and I hope it will set all this at rest once for all. It's only lately that I've heard one or two rumours of this man—rumours of certain places he's been seen at, certain company he seems to keep, and reports of a nature we needn't specify. I needn't say that if I'd heard them sooner I'd have taken very good care you'd

never met him. I admit that I was perhaps a little too hasty in taking up with a man I didn't know very much about—I admit it; but if I was foolish, that was all. And it's quite possible the things I've heard aren't true, and anyway he isn't here to defend himself. But it's also quite possible that where there's smoke there's fire, and I'm going to give myself and you, not him, the benefit of the doubt. . . . I've determined he's not to come here again. He'll not know my reason; I shall take no steps; I shall merely not ask him again. I'm glad now that he's never been on the footing of coming unasked; that will make it all the easier. . . . Just one other thing. I should like to repeat now what I said the other day, but in stronger terms—that you'll oblige me by having nothing more whatever to do with him."

Again she recognized the tone that was not to be trifled with. "You assume that I want to," was all that she dared say.

"If you don't, so much the better," he said shortly.

"And," she ventured further, "as you say, he isn't here to answer you."

"I should say precisely the same if he was. And just one thing more. You speak of possible new friends. As I say, I don't want to meet things half way, but it's only fair to both of us that I should say this: that *they're* always subject to my approval too. That also, I think, was made clear before we married, so please understand that. I don't make the same mistake twice. I'm responsible, and I won't be responsible unless I direct."

She did not dare to carry it any further. It was not that she could not have found more, much more, to say. She could have told him to his face, for instance, that he was jealous; but the thought that he was jealous of a living man opened sulphurous vistas. . . . And, she complained to herself, he was certainly tyrannous. She seemed to hear again that laugh of Bartholomew's that had such power over her. A curiosity, a relic, a survival, Bartholomew had called this conception of marriage that Harry had; and she herself had more than once surmised that the inflexibility of his moral code was not unattributable to his origin. He had

climbed; the thing just above him had always been the perfect thing, or he would not have longed so ardently to grasp it; when he had discovered its imperfection there was always something else, really perfect this time, immediately above him; and probably he was dreaming of something that did not exist outside his own narrow, clean, puritanical heart. Withal he was hard; his unflinching sense of justice was tempered with very little mercy; and its most rigorous judgments seemed always to be passed in the very moments when she herself yearned for that gentler code of the novelists and playwrights—a code based on unlimited mercy, tempered with no more justice than would have sufficed to give it stiffening enough to hold the Emperor's-new-clothes-like fabric together. How much easier such a code would have made things all round! Nobody then would have been responsible for anything whatever. Sin would have met with sympathy, condoning, and the medical attentions of the alienist. Punishment there would have been none, since punishment is painful, and pain an evil. Laws would have operated with a by-your-leave—the transgressor would have been pityingly handed over to the quite sufficient torments of his own conscience—and Society would have been a sort of general office for the dispensing of indulgences for whosoever and whatsoever. . . . Beautiful, but so unfortunately unrealizable dream!

“Oh, dear!” Berice sighed. . . . “Well, your views certainly have the advantage of being easier than mine to express.”

“Dearest!” he appealed again, with hands a little outstretched. “Don't, don't be a rebellious darling!”

“Don't be *me*, you mean,” she said despairingly. “That, my dear Harry, is just the whole point!”

“Never mind the point—leave the point alone—don't be a foolish child. Kiss me, Berice—ah, no! Kiss me . . . there, that's better than 'points'! . . . Suppose we go to a theatre? . . .”

The last word of their wrangle nevertheless remained hers. They went to the theatre, but she chose the piece. It was *The Unhappiness of Helen*, and it was by an especial friend of Bartholomew's.

But not all their differences were settled so amicably. Sometimes his patience gave out earlier. Perhaps this was attributable to the state of his health, for he had a slight but obstinate cough, which the warmth of the weather did not appreciably relieve. Berice's own abounding health was not a factor that made for tolerance of ill-health in others, and sometimes, when he kept his room for a day, or even his bed, and she read to him or wrote letters at his dictation, she was conscious of the irk it was to put on a decent mask of sympathy. On such occasions he was considerate of her and exacting towards her by turns, now insisting that she should leave him and go out into the air, and now craving for expressions of affection that were difficult to grant to order and no less difficult to refuse. In this respect he seemed to become increasingly tactless, and one day—he had decided to spend the day in bed—he even went so far as to reproach her in so many words that her endearments were seldom volunteered. At that it was she who for once held herself well in check, and he who showed the petulance.

“Oh, Harry,” she said in a low voice, taking the hand that lay on the coverlet and looking earnestly at him, “if only, if only we could understand one another! I don't care for you one bit the less because sometimes I don't say it.”

He tossed his head over on the pillow. “Oh, it doesn't matter, it doesn't matter,” he complained, his face turned away.

Her face wore a distressed look.

“Oh, dear, what can I say when you take things like that? You know I love you—but sometimes you make it hard for me *ever* to tell you so!”

“It doesn't matter; don't make a fuss,” he repeated. “I understand. No woman wants a man when he's like this. Won't you go out for a walk?”

“I'd rather stay with you; I really would. I shall have to leave you for an hour presently, for it's to-day Mr. Neill is bringing Mrs. Enright; but let me stay with you till then.”

But again he tossed his head on the pillow.

"I'm only boring you. I—I——" Then his slight, hard cough came, occupying him for the next minute or so. . . . It left the whites of his reddish-brown eyes suffused with pink.

"You don't care to come downstairs for an hour? You needn't dress properly," she suggested gently.

"No, I'm better here," he said in a weakened voice. "You might ask Neill about that little Tanagra. The car's ready as soon as he is."

(It had been some months before that Neill had written to them that he was going to copy in silver, as a wedding-gift and a 'mascot' for Emney's car, one of the Tanagras in the British Museum.)

"Oh, Harry," Berice interpolated, "we can't very well mention it, since he's giving it to us!"

"No, I suppose we can't," Harry grumbled, knowing that as well as she, but not in the mood for concealing his private thoughts. "But I hope he won't be as long over it as he was with that thing of young Finch-Ommaney. . . ."

He turned on his pillow again, and for some minutes was silent. The example of Neill's work of which he had spoken had taken his thoughts back to the little church in Cotterdale and the last time he himself had stood there. The chain of memory was traceable, for presently he said:

"You've not heard from your uncle lately, have you?"

"Not for a fortnight," Berice replied, her finger tracing the pattern of the coverlet. "He's still in Coventry, looking after his model."

(Everard's jacket for the moment was the standardizing of motor alarms. He had designed a gong or a cornet, and dreamed of some such influence with the Board of Trade as should persuade that body to make the adoption of his device obligatory.)

Again Emney was silent. This time his thought, had Berice known it, would have shocked her. Strive as he would to put the matter out of his mind, the memory of a certain counterfoil recurred to him from time to time. Quite by chance, the cheque that had been attached to that counterfoil, returning to the bank, had come under his eye, and he had seen that it was drawn 'To Self' and endorsed 'Berice

Emney.' In matters of business he was scrupulous to the last farthing; a distasteful suggestion of secrecy about the transaction, whatever it had been, had caused him genuine pain; and though he had kept his own counsel he had not been able to avoid a surmise. The surmise was, that Everard had had the money and was jacketing with it. . . . Berice he could have pardoned for her lack of confidence in him; she was utterly inexperienced in such matters; but he thought the less of Everard Beckwith for it. . . .

"Here they are," Berice said suddenly, as the opening and closing of a door downstairs was heard, and a servant presently tapped at the bedroom door. "You'll be quite all right if I leave you for a little while?"

"Yes. Apologize for me."

"I'll explain—though it won't be necessary, as they won't know you haven't gone to your office."

"No, of course they won't: I forgot that. . . ."

She kissed him and went out.

But on the landing outside the bedroom door she found the servant still lingering. The servant said something that brought a sudden look of perturbation into Berice's face. "Wait a minute," she said to the servant; and then she turned and re-entered the bedroom. She advanced to the bedside.

"Harry," she said.

"Well?"

"It isn't Mr. Neill and Mrs. Enright. It's Mr. Bartholomew."

Slowly Emney's face became rust-red on his pillow. For half a minute it became steadily more inflamed; then he raised himself on his elbow.

"Who?" he said.

"Mr. Bartholomew."

"Bartholomew——!"

"Yes."

"Ah! . . . Close the door, and then please bring me my dressing-gown."

Berice closed the door, but instead of fetching the dressing-gown returned to the bedside and bent over him.

"Don't get up, Harry," she said quietly. "We can send word down that nobody's at home."

"My dressing-gown, please," he muttered, rising. "We'll end this now," he added. . . .

"Dear," she begged him, "stay where you are. You're not fit to get up——"

"I was fit enough a few minutes ago to see Neill, it seemed. It isn't a question of my fitness; it's a question of what's got to be done.—To come here and ask for you!"

"Darling——"

"I see. He didn't know I was at home. I see, I see. To ask for you! . . . Has this happened before?" he asked, suddenly looking her full in the face.

"Never, never, Harry!" she cried.

"You swear that?"

Her bosom had been pressed against his. Suddenly she withdrew it, and ceased to lean over the bed.

"Oh, Harry! . . . When I've said a thing I don't feel called on to 'swear' it. . . ."

"You won't swear it?"

It was gross of him, and it stabbed her. "No," she replied, upright by the bed. "You oughtn't to ask it."

"Perhaps not—but the fact remains that that man's got some sort of hold on you," he accused her, redly glaring.

"Hold? What hold should——" she began, but he silenced her with a peremptory "Brr! Don't tell me! . . . My dressing-gown, and send word down to him that he's to wait a minute or two. You stay here. Oh, yes, he shall see Mrs. Emney—or her representative at any rate!"

He was half out of bed.

Then the altercation began—one of those wretched altercations he seemed to have the power to drag her down into.

"Harry, you're unjust——"

"Never mind that. Wait here till I come back."

"More than that (I'm beginning to expect that of you)—you're making the servant a party to this. She'll see you go down."

"Then the servant can leave. I'll end this now——"

"You'd end it equally well by saying nobody's at home."

"Thank you, but I know your suggestions for ending things. We'll discuss those in a few minutes——"

"I rather object to your making yourself ridiculous, but I object most strongly to your making *me* so——"

"Your objections shall be attended to when this matter is settled."

Then abruptly she broke out: "I warn you, Harry! You're taking the wrong way with me!"

"We'll see to that, too, later. I've suspected this for some time. I'm not sure that this *is* the first occasion——"

"I swear it, I swear it!" she broke wildly out.

"You refused to a minute or two ago—you've had time to think——"

"Harry!" The indignant cry rang out like a shot.

"I don't care!" he cried. "If I made a mistake before, I'll mend it now! Upon my soul, I hesitate to take your word against the evidence of my own senses! I don't know how far this has gone, but I know how much farther it's going! I'll get to the bottom of it! . . . Be so good as to wait here."

But she had advanced to the door. She spoke haughtily.

"I propose to wait in my own room. Do as you like, but don't say I haven't given you fair warning. Without reason you're as jealous as a fiend; be careful. . . ."

"To come here when he knows I'm out!" Emney was muttering, as he struggled into his dressing-gown. "To come here. . . ."

But before he could make himself ready the servant had knocked at the door again. Berice opened the door herself.

"Mr. Bartholomew's sorry, ma'am, but he's afraid he can't wait. He asked Mrs. Emney if she'd accept these theatre tickets. Mr. Bartholomew is sorry Mr. Emney isn't well——"

"Has he gone?" Harrison Emney cried from the middle of the room.

The distant sound of the closing of the front door answered him. The servant retired again. Emney, red with rage, was striding up and down the room.

"Of course he'd bring theatre tickets or something—an

excuse, an excuse! My house! . . . Sorry I was not well? He learned I was at home, then, and bolted! . . . My house! . . . And you—this isn't the first time you've threatened me—you did threaten me a moment ago——”

Berice, pale and upright by the door, was as cold as he was hot.

“Have you any further insults to heap on me?”

“*I* heap! . . . You heap them yourself. You lay yourself open to suspicion—to suspicion, I say. But you may consider this finished. I'll write to him now——”

There was a writing-table in the bedroom; he crossed to it and sat down. He did not lift his head from his letter when she spoke again.

“Very well, since you force this on me,” she said. “But there's something you also may consider finished until you choose to sue for it again. . . . I shall keep my own room.”

“Keep it, then, in God's name!” he cried, still not looking up from the envelope into which he was thrusting two theatre tickets.

The door closed behind her.

XX

IN keeping her word to him her heart was hardened as it had never been hardened. It was hardened by her consciousness of her perfect innocence of intention towards Bartholomew. She looked on Bartholomew as a maligned man. Sad error she knew only too well; it was wrought like a dark woof into the web of her life; and she thought that in knowing that she knew malignant wickedness also. Very well, was her thought: let things fall out as they might. She would not put herself in Bartholomew's way, but she certainly would not study how to avoid him. And if they did chance to encounter, there would be a certain satisfaction in informing Harry of their meeting. She might as well be condemned with a reason as without one—be hanged, as Bartholomew had said, as well for the sheep as for the lamb. . .

In the meantime, such speech as she had with her husband inclined to the frigid side of indifference, and he for his part obstinately placed chairs for her, and stiffly and sedulously held doors open for her whenever she left the room.

The servant to whom Emney had given the letter to Bartholomew, with instructions to post it immediately, had descended the stairs as Neill and Mrs. Enright had ascended. A few minutes later Berice had received her two callers. They had not stayed long: Berice's hint that her husband was unwell, and the still evident disturbance of her spirits, had been sufficient; but one thing had been instantly plain to her. It was that Neill had spoken to his betrothed about her. She had been strongly attracted by the young widow's face at Lady Haverford's dance; the huge dark eyes beneath the brows that ran a little upwards to the temples had spoken mutely to her with a gravity far too firmly established there

by life and experience not to be perfectly harmonious with their quiet gleams of mischief; and now, as Berice had taken her hand, those eyes had returned her own magnificence to her with rich acknowledgments. The three had talked about the dance—about Cotterdale (which Mrs. Enright had never seen, but of which also Neill had spoken)—of Bunny, whom she knew (Bunny, it appeared, had buried himself somewhere in Brittany); and then Neill and his betrothed had risen to take their leave. Berice had felt a swelling in her throat as, naturally and without a trace of self-consciousness, Mrs. Enright had done an unusual thing on a second meeting—put up her face (she was a small woman) to be kissed.

“You’ll come and see me, won’t you?” she had said. “Come when Murragh isn’t there to bother us——”

Then they had left.

Berice returned her call when her estrangement from her husband had lasted a week. Mrs. Enright lived on the north side of Kensington Gardens, and Berice took a cab as far as the Memorial and then walked across the Park. She found Mrs. Enright at home, and, weary and harassed and unstrung by the occurrences of the past week, this time it was she who sought the embrace.

“Now we can talk,” said the young widow. . . .

There were no stages in the coming together of the two women. Neill had got some of those things over. Perhaps, too, many things were already ripe in Berice’s own breast for that coming together. It had been with a little leaping of her heart that she had run across the ballroom to meet Emily Tracy and had lost herself for half an hour in a breathless, exciting, eager, sweet girl-talk; women fly to women when distress hems them about; and here was a woman who, if all rumours were true, had known the worst of Life pitifully early. Berice had not the least wish to unbosom herself to her; she knew little about her save that in her presence something came over her heart that she had not known since she was a child; and she did not think to inquire what it was in her that, like the Cotterdale rocks and heather, could be expressed in one word only—home.

Mrs. Enright did most of the talking. Berice had already

heard a little of her unhappy story, but Mrs. Enright spoke of it cheerfully, briskly even, and as no matter for sadness now. Out of that tragedy of her first marriage she had won a peace, a thankfulness that the world was as good as it was, and a sympathy for the stumblers and strivers and gropers that (though Berice did not know how she got this so strong impression, since it was from nothing that Mrs. Enright said) again brought the lump into her throat. Somehow it made her feel ashamed. It accused her, made her utterly self-centred. In especial it made of her break with Harry a miserable, vulgar, and contemptible thing. . . .

"And, of course, Murragh's told me a little about you too," Mrs. Enright continued, and immediately took away even the appearance of intrusiveness by hoping that Berice liked China tea. . . . But Berice writhed as she saw those dusty laurels of her supposed magnificence once more in Mrs. Enright's eyes. . . .

She sat with Mrs. Enright for an hour and a half that seemed to have wings; and then she rose. She took both Mrs. Enright's hands. The hardness at her heart had all gone. She told herself that she had been a beast. She intended now to go straight home and be reconciled with Harry.

"Good-bye," she said.

"My name's Mollie," said Mrs. Enright. . . .

"Good-bye, Mollie."

She left.

Berice walked slowly towards the Gardens again, her thoughts humiliating her as she went. . . . Yes, she had been a beast. Even had Harry not been unwell she had been a beast, and he was unwell—so unwell that more than once she had had anxious thoughts about him. She now found a hundred things to say in his favour. She had only to give that jealousy of his another name—she had only to call it over-carefulness, a sense of responsibility for her safety, the superficially unattractive but strong reverse side of his love for her—and it became a thing she ought to thank God she possessed. She had called that restraint which was only security; her eyes had been fixed, not on the treasures she had, but on treasures which, did she attain them, would

still leave her discontented ; and she had just left a woman who (she grew uncomfortably hot) had known nothing but hardship and neglect, faithlessness, penury, drunkenness and desertion, and yet had not suffered the odorous lamp of her faith and love to go out ! . . . Yes, she was ashamed. She would seek Harry the moment he returned and tell him so . . .

She had stepped over the low railings to walk on the grass. Not far away on her right lay the Round Pond with its sails of cutters, grey and white, moving across the twinkling water. A chair-man passed her with his metal clip and strip of tickets, and she remembered that Harry would hardly be home yet. She would sit down.

She walked towards a chair beneath a flowering chestnut.

But she had not reached the chestnut before a hat was raised at her side. So absorbed in her meditation had she been that the gesture startled her. She turned. It was Bartholomew.

He, too, seemed to have noticed that a mood lay heavy upon her, for he did not offer to walk with her. Mechanically she stopped. He did not speak, but in his eyes was a plain question : " Well ? . . . What now ? . . ." She was still so absorbed that it positively took her half a minute to bring her thoughts to bear on his presence at all. Then she remembered—her husband's letter.

" Before you speak," he suddenly said, " let me tell you that I'll leave you instantly if you wish."

The words put a slight, a very slight responsibility on her. Although they had been returned, she remembered that there were two theatre tickets he must be thanked for.

" I'm very much obliged to you——" she said, with painful embarrassment. Bartholomew could hardly have appeared more discordantly with her wishes.

" For offering to leave you ? "

" No—I mean for the theatre tickets you were so good as to bring."

" The theatre tickets——? " For the moment he himself did not remember the precise excuse that had served his turn. " Ah, those. . . . I'm sorry you were unable to make use of them. It doesn't matter."

"I had intended to write and thank you," she said, her eyes on the grass.

"Oh? . . ."

Such irony of intonation could not miss. It was as if he had said, "You *are* allowed to write your own letters, then?" . . . She bit her lip.

"Anyway, I thank you," she said, avoiding the eyes she felt he was trying to fasten on her.

"Pray don't speak of it, Mrs. Emney." He used her name, or refrained from using it, according as an end might be served. "Does that conclude our conversation?" he added.

"I'm—I'm—rather pressed for time," she murmured awkwardly.

"Precisely. I understand. We might have talked as we walked instead of standing, but if my company might compromise you——"

"I think I'd rather you—you——" she faltered.

He bowed. "Of course, it must be as you wish. But"—his manner changed a little, almost imperceptibly hardened—"but unless you'd *very much* rather, there's something I should very much like to mention."

She wanted to be off, but he was not in any way forcing her to remain, and the quickest way to be rid of him might be to hear what he had to say. He, for his part, had been deferential in manner—almost to an extreme—as he would have been anything else for the sake of getting her to listen to him.

"Then please don't be very long," she murmured. "I'm a little late now," she added, and then remembered that he had found her seeking a chair.

"Very well. Thank you.—For that matter, it's a thing that must be put quickly.—I suppose you know I had a letter from your husband?"

"Yes."

"Are you aware of the terms of it?"

"I didn't see it."

"Nor hear it read?"

"No."

"But you know the purport of it?"

She hung her head. "I—I think I do."

"May I ask if the genial idea that prompted its sending originated with you?"

Berice thought, carefully, long and nervously before replying. Then, anxious to make things clear, she answered in a low voice:

"It did not originate with me; but——"

"'But——'?" he prompted, after a moment.

"But all the same it is my wish now, because—I feel I ought to tell you this—because I've come to the conclusion that my husband is—is—to be considered first."

He caressed his thrice-shaven upper lip; his lids flickered once or twice behind his neat glasses.

"I see. . . . 'First,' you say. . . . Then would you, if it were possible, that is to say if you were—well, a free agent in the matter—consider anybody else (I'm not thinking of myself—it might be *yourself* you were considering) in a secondary sense?"

She murmured something: it was no good discussing things that were not possible. . . . But he interrupted her. That slight hardening of his manner had grown into a stiffness.

"Oh, pardon me! It may be a matter of some importance to *me*. You see, I haven't replied to that letter yet. I confess that I was hoping I might chance to run across you before answering it. The terms of my reply will naturally depend a good deal on *your* attitude."

"Then please understand that that is one of acquiescence," she said quickly.

He nodded. "But it doesn't follow even then that mine is," he answered. "Have you thought for a moment how *I* stand in this? Let me explain. You know what there's been between you and myself—nothing—*rien de rien de rien*. Our friendship has been absolutely open—clear of the faintest possibility of suspicion—or so I should have thought. But you see how this sudden change has altered things for me—for me, I say. I'm known to have been a visitor at your husband's house; suddenly it's noticed that I don't go any more. People gossip. One day, perhaps, an imputation is made that I'm compelled to take notice of.

. . . But you know how things go round, and so I abridge. You see all this.—Well, in the face of it, don't you think I have some right to consideration too? ”

Something within her warned her to leave him at once; and yet he was reasonable enough. And yet again, she could not prevent a little stiffening of manner as she replied:

“ I'm sorry, Mr. Bartholomew—I'm deeply sorry. That's all I can say.”

But he fumed now.

“ Sorry? . . . Oh, I know what that means! As far as that goes I dare say that ridiculous husband of yours—no, I will speak; if you won't give me leave I'll take it; I'm determined now to know how we stand—I dare say he would say *he* was sorry too, in that sense. But that doesn't butter any parsnips.—You didn't see the letter, you say? ”

“ Oh,” Berice appealed quickly, “ he wrote in heat!——”

“ And I'm to take it calmly—to take it lying down when he speaks vaguely of ‘ certain reasons,’ ‘ he'd be greatly obliged to me,’ ‘ things, probably untrue, have come to his ears ’—willing enough to wound, and afraid to strike—good God! If he's anything to say, let him say it. There *may* be rumours about me for anything I know; there may about him—or you—or any of us——”

She could not in honesty say that he had not some reason for his passion. The efforts he appeared to be making to master it were, too, well enough in their way. No, she had to admit she could hardly take him up on the grounds of injustice to her husband. . . .

“ And what, when you get to the bottom of it, is it all based on? ” he cried, suddenly dropping his voice as somebody passed and continuing more quietly. “ Oh, it's really got nothing to do with me at all. I merely take the slashes he deals out! . . . I'll tell you what it is really; it's this: That for a notion of marriage-rights and so forth that's been exploded this twenty years he sacrifices first a fine woman—and then he sacrifices me, not fine, perhaps, but fine enough to know fineness when I see it! For *vieux jeu* like that—fire-irons-and-fender love—a mulish impulse of possession, the instinct that any brute has—oh, I can't trust myself to

find words for it, it makes me so sick!—a fine flower of friendship is to be trampled down, you're to be immured, and I'm to be plunged into Heaven knows what sort of a tangle of innuendoes and suspicions—all because he thinks a wife is a thing to be chained to a hearth as a dog is chained to a kennel!——”

“Stop!” she cried, but wondering even as she did so that the cry should so lack resolution. . . . But she could hardly blame Bartholomew for thinking what she herself had thought only an hour or two before. . . .

But his bitterness was doing its work excellently; he would stop when it had ceased to be efficacious.

“I can't stop now—we've gone too far. If this is to be our last meeting you shall at least know what I think! And *you!* *You* submit! *You* come to heel like that! By Heaven, if you do I lose less than I thought I did!——”

“I won't listen to you!” she cried, shaking her head in agitation.

“You've got to listen, at any rate for once. *I'm* not content to let things rest as they are——!”

“Please leave me, Mr. Bartholomew,” she said, looking him for the first time in the eyes.

But offers to leave her also had served their turn, and Bartholomew did not use the tools at the end that he found serviceable at the beginning. He refused to leave her. Whether for or against himself, all was one as long as he could contrive to get her excited. . . . She could not have told—he probably knew to a yard—at what point they had begun to walk towards the tall trees behind which lay the Flower Walk; she only knew that they were crossing a path in the direction of the Memorial and were approaching the less frequented part of the Gardens that lay westward. And he was talking again, in a tone in which the cold precision of resentment had taken the place of rage.

“*You* submit to it!” he declared with scorn. “You, thinking as I do—you know in your heart you do—deny it if you can—*you* to fall away like this for lack of a little courage! . . . I suppose you'll tell him all about this meeting? . . .”

If his last words were not a taunt they were worse. Dully she was now trying to remember by what processes Bartholomew had become so admitted to her privacies that in his presence she hardly felt as if she belonged entirely to herself. Something—something precious—had gone out of her own keeping, and now, for the first time, she felt disquietude about the man she felt to be responsible for the safety of it. She had not seen him like this before, and she was rather afraid of him. . . .

But she merely answered, "I must."

"Do you—er—confess to him?" he smilingly inquired. . . .

Then swiftly she saw still more clearly how he was overcoming and possessing her. It was as if, rapidly, one after another, confident that some moment the significance of which she could not guess at had come, he was twitching any number of veils aside. Still more afraid, she cried out in an apprehensive voice.

"Oh, leave me, leave me, or I must run from you!"

He scowled with penetration.

"Have you given yourself entirely over to him—present, past, world without end?" he asked.

It was doubtful, overmastered as she was by this new and strange glamour of him, whether she could have run. . . . Nay, it was not doubtful, for as she passed a chair she suddenly sank on it, unkeyed, for the moment helpless. And he, standing over her, cruel, weighing, observing, thought that the time had come when he might do worse than let fly one more shaft at a venture. . . . Slowly he drew back until the cord was taut. . . .

"*Have* you done that?"

She struggled with something in her throat.

"*Have* you? . . . Future, present"—an exquisite pause—"and past? . . . *Ah, you have!*" he triumphed; and then, after another pause, "And how did he take it, with those hidebound views of his?"

He had landed—in the clout. Her face, swiftly upturned to the sky, its pallor and its spasm of anguish, proclaimed it aloud. The day seemed to blacken over her, the ground to heave beneath her. By whatever steps it had come about—

by what hazards, piecings together, trackings, gropings, checks, pickings up, wormings and nosings he had come by the knowledge, he knew—God of Pity, he knew! . . .

And with a far more frightful shock than any knowledge that had come to him had administered, knowledge had come to her also—knowledge of what this man was. It was a hideous overturning and descent. She was too dizzy and sick to be able to clutch at even a single fragment of the wreckage of what she had thought him to be: faiths and credulities and beliefs rushed away from her as if they would leave her nothing but to mock herself and die. His poems! . . . His beautiful words! . . . His friendship with her! . . .

And then, in that moment in which her whole brain flamed white with the knowledge that he knew, and the knowledge of the purpose to which he would put his knowledge, a wonder happened. As they say of a man strapped to the horrid lightning-apparatus of death that excess of shock so whelms and shatters his frame that he continues to live as he had long ago lived as an unknowing babe, so in the very heart and storm-centre of dread she found a mysterious rest and stillness. It was in a voice that seemed to her to be imperfectly located, that she did not at all recognize as her own, that she spoke after many minutes. Already that seemed an age-old question of his to which she replied.

“Take what?” that imperfectly located voice that seemed the voice of a third person sounded far away in her ears.

He repeated the words after her. “Take what? . . . Why, take what I’m speaking of.”

Again that stranger’s voice spoke with her lips.

“I can’t have heard you properly. I beg your pardon. Will you tell me again what that was?”

And he found her superb—superb, to dare to play it out to a finish like this! His voice also seemed to her to come across voids and chasms.

“Is it necessary?” she heard him say.

“It is necessary,” came from herself.

“You mean . . . you won’t take it as said?” he cried in astonishment. . . .

“ I must know what it is, please.”

He laughed—he truly laughed. He had not performed such an exquisite disembowelling this many a day. . . .

“ Well, for one thing, you’re leaving out of the question certain powers of observation on my part,” he said.

“ Be specific.”

“ Certain powers of observation on my part, which drive me to specific conclusions. . . . Oh, I really hesitate to do what you ask of me ! . . . But as an example : sudden faintnesses may mean nothing at all ; repeated, they may mean nothing at all ; but repeated several times, and always on the same occasion, they are more likely than not to be significant, you know.”

The next moment she had amazed herself. She knew that he spoke of her faintness on the night of Lady Haverford’s dance ; and all that had passed there rose, made whole and perfected now, before her. Keigwyn, Keigwyn’s unnamed chance acquaintance, Neill, the first mention of Lionel Finch-Ommaney’s name—her descent with Bartholomew into the supper room for the purpose of pumping him—that unlicensed talk of Harry of which he had made such adroit use—Lionel, and the words, written now in flame on her brain, “ *you liked the other one too* ” . . . she saw it all spread out with the clarity and the absurd simplicity of the puzzle that is made plain. That central stillness of her mind, the stillness of the sleeping top, still held ; that Familiar that she had called at one time her Defensiveness, at another her Pride, always anything but her Conscience, seemed to await breathlessly the words that might fall in that strangely remote voice from her lips ; and then there sprang out the unplanned, undreamed of, useless, incredible, impossible, pathetically ridiculous lie.

“ You mean my faintness at Lady Haverford’s ? ”

“ You may have had it elsewhere too. . . . ”

“ And you spoke of your powers of observation ? ”

“ I did say something of the kind.”

“ You are a man of experience—a man of the world ? ”

He felt that he was being mocked. “ Come,” he said impatiently.

She laughed horribly.

“Observation . . . certain powers of observation. . . . yes, I *had* a faintness—I was married last September.”

A man with a stone heart might have pitied and spared her after that; the preposterousness of her hope of anything from it might have moved the very trees; but no ruth dwelt in those stews of his breast. Though heartstrings cracked and flew like the gut of an instrument, he must be galvanized to his sensation. And he had it now. It was stupendous. Mettle he had known her to be; but *this* mad effrontery, *this* transparent audacity! . . . He marvelled.

“God, but you’ve nerve!” he insulted her with his admiration. He repeated it: “God, but you’ve nerve!——”

He was all unconscious that that ice in her eyes could sear.

“And God! . . . What luck *he* was in!——” he breathed enviously. . . .

For one moment longer that frightful calm held her.

“He will be glad to hear it. I will tell him.”

He stepped back to look at her.

“*Him!* . . . You think I mean . . . ?”

There was no need to mention either Harry’s name or the other’s; for all at once her calm broke. As lamps might shine into lamps, their eyes gave, took. From the bottom of hers he fetched up for his handling the poor, naked, violated truth; and down, down, down in the depths of his the cad leered up at her out of the slime. He laughed. . . .

But suddenly he seized her wrist. He broke into rapid, arrogant speech.

“He was your lover—I dare you to deny it! Look at me—I dare you to deny it! . . . God, but I hope he was worth it, your Lionel!—you’re magnificent—magnificent! I love you—I adore you! What do *I* care what sort of a blockhead you’ve tied yourself to! Let him look after himself! The past—the future—what do they matter! We’ve got this wonderful present! . . . You know that where *he* can touch you at one point I’m yourself, your very self, at twenty! You are loving me now—darling!—you’re loving me now—I dare you to resist me!——”

He never dreamed how far she now was from the thing he

said. If for the moment she did not speak it was that she was once more appalled to think where she might, but for this, have stood.

“ You love me, you love me ! ” he cried, abysmally drowned in his egotism. “ You daren’t deny it—you *daren’t* lie to yourself so ! Come away with me—you’re coming—coming away from this damned frigid England to a place where men and women can love as they were meant to love ! I know of places—there’s sun and sky and joy and laughter there—they sing *Carpe Diem* there—come, come—now—as you stand ! Come ! . . . Then we’ll live—live and love ! . . . God above, how I hate England ! . . . Come with me—I’ve a thousand loves for you—you don’t know—you’ll never know unless you come——”

Oh, the dreary flogging of that tired nag that had borne him through his youth ! In that moment he almost believed that he wanted more of her than to be able to say that she had yielded. His prodigious vanity blinded him to the look that had slowly overspread her face. She seemed to be listening to a far-off echo . . . an echo of the crudities of the novel-box that would have mortified him had he known of it ! . . .

“ You’ll come—you’ll come now—we’ll do one beautiful and romantic thing if we never did one before ! *That* opinionated fool ! . . . Oh, I’ll teach you what love is—I’ll teach you ! If it lasted only a day and I died the next I’d do it—I’d do it ! Come, you woman made for me—let’s run—run !——”

He flung out his arms.

His touch on her flesh broke the spell. She sprang backwards, overturning her chair ; she shuddered as if she had touched the exuding bosses of a toad. Again she was quiet, but her quietness now was not that former fearful stillness of the storm-centre. She saw how old, old and drained he was. . . .

She spoke in a low and shaking voice.

“ I was warned of things like you—in my thoughts—long ago——”

The words came fragmentarily out, as if she was in the grasp of something that shook her bodily. He had lost the throw—even he saw it—his vanity was so split and cloven. . . .

“ I see now. I’ve had to see to know. They told me, but I refused to be told——”

He watched her with sudden vindictiveness under half-closed lids.

“ I don’t know where I can hide myself. I abhor myself. What is it that’s made me so vile, I wonder?——”

Still he watched her. . . .

“ I see now. You thought that what had happened once would happen twice. I see. I knew there were men like you, but I’d never been so close to one——”

He opened his lips. He still tried to sting—to sting her, now so far beyond his power to hurt. “ Never? . . . ” he said, with the old smile.

“ Never. Oh, you can’t heap any shame on me more than I can on myself. I’ll go and pray, for both of us.”

“ Religious? . . . ” he spat again.

“ I don’t think it’s that. It’s merely that if you may know, anybody may.—Don’t follow me.”

“ To confession? . . . ”

“ To my husband.”

“ To tell him all this? ”

“ Ah, no, not *this*. . . . ”

“ What, will you conceal from him that you’ve disobeyed him and seen me? ”

“ No,” she replied mournfully.

“ No? . . . But you said ‘ not this ’——”

“ Not this . . . nor anything else. I’ll no longer conceal anything.”

“ ‘ Anything? ’ . . . What *can* you be talking about? This is very odd. You’ll no longer conceal——”

“ Anything whatever. As I say, if you may know anybody may know. I’ve finished with it now—or shall have presently.”

She had entirely forgotten that Bartholomew was still ignorant of the most delectable bit of it all. . . .

He stared. ‘ No longer conceal anything—finished with it—if you may know anybody may know.’ . . . What *could* she mean? Was there something else? He had merely asked her whether she was going to tell her husband of this meeting: ‘ Ah, no, not *this*,’ she had said; and had gone on

to speak as if *this* was a trifle by comparison with something else. . . . *What* else? *Surely not*—

A surmise of such beauty flashed across Bartholomew's brain that involuntarily he took a step back and drew in his breath with a gasp. . . .

What! That egregious ass of a husband didn't know—*didn't know!* She had actually married him *without telling him*—or without telling him more than that thin tale with which she had tried to hoodwink himself! . . . Bartholomew had assumed that the husband knew all about her Lionel, condoned, and had married her in tameness and docility and a closing of the eyes to the slight crack in a piece otherwise of such high and signal rarity. . . .

Oh, it was huge—rich—huge and rich almost past belief. He shook with the laughter he tried to suppress. . . .

Then, after a vain search for adequate words, he gave the tremendous thing its only fitting tribute—the tribute of a simple comment.

“And how,” he said presently, “how, as I said before, do you suppose he'll take it, with those hidebound principles of his?”

She hung her head sadly.

“I don't know. If he'll let me go on living he'll be bountiful to me. But I'm not thinking of myself. . . .”

“H'm!” Bartholomew remarked. . . . “H'm!” he said again, licking his lips; and then he broke out, enviously, covetously, almost with tears of vexation at the unattainableness of it:

“By Jove! I should like to be there!—”

It was true. He would have liked it exceedingly. The scene when she should at last tell her husband ought to provide such a thrill as even he had never experienced. And he could not be there. . . .

XXI

HARRY was not in his room when she reached home. She rang.

“Hasn't Mr. Emney come in yet?” she asked.

“Yes, ma'am, but he's gone out again. He left a letter for you in the dining-room.”

“Bring it, please—but no; never mind; I'm going down.”

She descended. The letter lay on the table. She tore it open and read it. It said that he had gone away until the Saturday night.

And the day was Wednesday.

It was always useless to attempt to read between the lines of Harry's letters. It was his style to state things and leave them. In the letter that fell from Berice's hand he asked to be excused for not having given her longer notice of this visit to a fellow-director, but the necessity had arisen suddenly, and their relations for a week had not, unhappily, been of such a nature that discussion of his movements would have been profitable. It was not likely that he would be detained later than Saturday, and he suggested that she might care to ask Emily Tracy to spend a day or two with her. He remained her affectionate husband, Harry.

She stood gazing at the letter on the table. Three days . . . she must wait three days. . . .

She gave a half-delirious laugh, and moved blunderingly to a sofa.

The effort for which she had gathered and steeled herself had been expended on the empty air, and her whole nature was for the moment overbalanced. All the force of the stroke had recoiled upon herself. It was impossible to write to him; the thing was not capable of being written; she

could only wait. The thought of waiting was now the one thing on earth that appalled her; yet it had come, like a blow between the eyes, and she must wait. Again she gave that lost, piteous laugh. She knew that in three days the news would have become so old and stale to herself that she would almost expect Harry to know all about it. . . .

It might as well have been three years. . . .

Well, she would have plenty of time to think things over. . . .

Three days! . . .

She closed her eyes in an effort to think calmly. . . . It was curious, a little frightful, that things should persist in their results for so long. She hardly comprehended how people dared to live lives in which one false step determined with such terrible fatality the whole course of the journey that followed. Was it worth while to try to live such a life? Would it not be better, given a fellow-stumbler of a nature not more rootedly wicked than one's own, to do as it had been proposed to her an hour before—cease to struggle, let the whole law go with the broken part of it, and fly to a clime where responsibility for actions did not make of Life a perpetual threatening and gloom? Or why go on living at all? Why could not people achieve one hour of happiness and die in it? And if they could not, why be born? What, what was the use? . . .

Well, she had three days in which to think these and similar things over. She caught herself in the act of mechanically looking at the clock. Half an hour of those three days had already gone. . . .

It was by the very transport of her pain that she did not yet clearly remember the details of what had passed an hour and a half before. Harry's letter had again whipped up her flagging mind to something of that steadiness of the sleeping top that had held her so strangely calm when the man she had just left had twitched that last veil aside, and she knew that the wobbling would come again presently. No good anticipating that wobbling; its hour would come cruelly soon; it would be far better to close her eyes and try to sleep away a portion of those three days. . . .

She did try, and was not conscious of the falling evening

nor of the maid who entered and stood just within the door, not knowing whether to wake her. The maid decided to wake her. She switched on the electric light, and then apologized for the disturbance. Berice yawned drowsily.

"You can take dinner up to my room," she said. "Mr. Emney will not be here. Take it all up at once, and don't disturb me unless I ring.—Yes, leave the light on here."

The maid withdrew, and Berice rose. There was a large gilt mirror over the sideboard, and she crossed to it and looked at herself, standing before it until she had forgotten again to look at her own image in it. Then she walked the length of the room and back, trailing her hand along the backs of the chairs pushed up under the table; and then she stood gazing down at the laid but unlighted fire. She was entirely aimless in all her movements, and she stood gazing into the fireplace merely until enough volition should have accumulated within her to turn her away again. . . .

Presently she walked to the door, switched off the light, and went up to her own room.

It was there, half an hour later, that she began to remember recent events, and to feel white and sick. The memories came bit by bit. First a phrase came; then its context started up; and then scene flowed into scene as if she had been looking at a series of dissolving views. . . . By and by she had run through the whole hideous gallery. In one picture, one of the earlier ones, he—that man—was speaking of Love and Truth and Honour—not to her, but to her husband, yet for her ears; another, still an early one, was—must even then have been—a frightful hypocrisy of respect to herself, the libertine's deadliest wile (this had been as he had helped her into a cab on the first occasion on which they had been out alone together); another was that terrible false earnestness he was able to put into his voice; another the first time he had used that insufferably taunting smile; and so on, up to the final outpouring of garbage. . . . That he might get her to lay herself the more open—she had not hitherto been conscious of possessing the fact of which this was a memory—he had even tried to make her drunk at Lady Haverford's house . . . vile, vile! . . .

And then there rang again in her ears those words of his :
“ And how do you think *he'll* take it, with those hidebound principles? . . . ”

How would he take it? That was a question she hadn't faced yet! . . .

Bleakly, bitterly, of course. For whatever she had thought at the time, eight or nine months before, or with whatever sophistries she had since sought to lull the uneasy, accusing spirit within her, she no longer claimed that he knew. He did not know, he had never known, and she knew he had not known and that it was impossible that he should have known. —And so no more of *that!* was her tortured cry to herself. . . . And now, when she did tell him, he would take it naked and sobbingly—perhaps with a shriek and a curse. Men with principles did take things bitterly; the others, the unprincipled, were the lucky ones. Bartholomew, for instance, beyond his personal chagrin and that mortifying stroke to his vanity, had in all probability not a care in the world; the Bartholomews are paid for, franked through life; and the Emneys settle the account with the dearest drops of their hearts. Limited as it was—she did not now think of its limitations—Harry *had* a standard from which to derogate. How would he take it? . . .

But even as she wondered, the old insidious spirit of concealment whispered to her again. Need he take it at all? Was he not happier remaining in ignorance of even so small a fraction of it as the events of that afternoon? And if he could not bear the lesser pang, how should he bear the greater? Had she the *right* to inflict this ruthless blow unless the starkest necessity demanded it? . . . But instantly she thrust the temptation aside. The starkest necessity *had* arisen. Already she had dishonoured him sufficiently. It was still a dream to her how she had been capable of dishonouring him so; but that was all, all over now. He must know. It was his destiny, as apparently it was hers to thrust the knife into him. She groaned. . . .

Oh, what spite against herself had sent him away for three days, now? . . .

But—her thoughts ranged within her like wild things in a

cage, one moment shaking the bars at this end, the next at that—*would* he be dishonoured if he did not know he was dishonoured? And *would* he know that he was dishonoured? She knew his slowness of perception. It was of no use pretending that he was not in many respects thick-skinned. Things that would have set her writhing he barely turned his head at, and perhaps it would take a finer-grained mind than his even to be aware that he was paying for the sins and errors of others. In that case, again, why trouble his equanimity? If he did not know that he lost anything, why, then, he actually did not lose anything. Why bring the loss home to him by telling him of it? . . .

And *what*, after all, was she to tell him? she asked herself, as if she had not asked herself the same question a minute before. Merely of what had been offered her that afternoon? It was surely not necessary! . . . That he was right about Bartholomew, and she wrong? That also could be told without a scene. . . . That other that she had kept close-smothered for so long? . . . Why tell him that to-day, more than yesterday, or to-morrow? Nothing had occurred to alter *that*; *that* was entirely independent of any action of Bartholomew's; it was only her conscience that made her lump all together and prevented her from destroying it all in detail. . . . And for the rest, since she intended henceforward to observe his slightest wish, and to be the pattern of wives to him, why tell him anything? . . . For she had no desire now to live her own life. To live that joint life with her husband, to be guided, checked when occasion arose, warned when her feet showed a disposition to stray, was now the dearest of her wishes.

The next moment she had panted out aloud that if ever she was to hold her head up again she must, must tell him. . . .

Then again temptation took the subtle form of the wish to spare Harry. A voice whispered cajolingly in her ear, counselling plain common sense. "Be sensible," it whispered; "say nothing; you know how fearfully hard he'll take it; you'll kill him—kill him. . . ."

And yet again she cried that she *must* tell him, on his return, three days hence. . . .

Was it to her honour that she fought as if for her life with this temptation? Perhaps; and yet there were other considerations than honour. He might, for instance, find out for himself—how, she didn't know; but then she hadn't known how Bartholomew had got at her secret, nor, in his different way, how Neill had come so near to it as he had done. . . . Or he might be told; again she didn't know how, nor by whom; but there were so many things now she knew she didn't know. She had been living on a humiliating sufferance. But for manhood, Bunny might have given her away; but for gentleness and honour of her, Neill might have betrayed her; and, manhood and gentleness and honour notwithstanding, Bartholomew, or for all she knew this other man, Keigwyn, had but a word to speak and—*pf!* all would be about her ears. Yes, she had spoken the truth to Bartholomew; if *he* might know, anybody might know. She had meant the words in a rather different sense, but either sense would do. She knew of nothing in Bartholomew's code of empty or privately interpreted words that could prevent his picking a benefactor's pocket even as he spoke of gratitude, that could prevent the seduction of a friend's wife with the word honour on his lips. Since the man denied everything, his position was unassailable. He had only to use a name, and the thing, for him, was so. He might betray Berice and call it faithfulness; why not? . . . Looked at in that way, it was plain policy to pour all out to Harry—not a lofty motive, perhaps, but one claiming the better interpretation when honour and policy chanced to coincide. . . .

To her honour, then, she rejected the thought of further concealment. If he had been there that night she would have told him at once. But he had gone away for three days. . . .

Well, she could keep a definite resolution, if not an impulse, for three days. She would tell him the moment he got back. In the meantime she tried to eat some soup. The rest of her dinner she left untouched. . . .

Of the consequences to herself of telling him she had hardly thought. "If he'll let me go on living he'll be boun-

tiful to me. . . .” They were her own words, and they returned to her now. Suppose he should insist on living apart from her—in the same house, as they had been for a week, or in separate establishments? What mask would she be able to put on, what explanation issue to the world? Suppose Everard, thinking her wronged, should take it on himself to act on her behalf? Suppose Neill, or Sir John Hartopp, or anybody else, should accuse her with their unspoken sympathy? With what face would she be able to carry it off? . . . And when she had put on that face, a laughing one perhaps, what mocking echoes of honour of her bravery would resound in her heart? . . . Heigh-ho! There was no end to it. All seemed to be closing in about her, and always, like dimly-seen, following sharks, two shadows, in an underworld of corrupt lives, sunken artists and men who had been kicked out of the Army, attended with upturned eyes her every movement. . . .

And then her own eyes grew hard and bright. There had leaped into her memory the thought of a morning long ago, by the side of a mountain stream, the day after she had heard of the death of a young subaltern in India. It had seemed to her then that his death had put the seal upon many things. Thenceforward (so she had planned it within herself) his memory was to have been a sweet and supporting thing close at her heart, her standard of loveliness for all things pretending to be lovely, fresh, gay and of the day-spring. That subaltern’s death was to have been a purification, a setting free . . . yes, that had been the idea. . . . She laughed outright, a laugh in which there was no pity for herself. Pity? Away with pity! When she did tell Harry—supposing, that was to say, these three eternal days ever passed—there would have to be more of bravado than of pity in the telling. Pity was wasted where there was no hope, and there was little enough hope in that parable of the twig—under at the fall, down the stream, caught in the up current, and down again . . . and again . . . and again. . . .

A clock downstairs struck the hour. Three hours had passed since she had entered the house. Three days less three hours. . . .

She rose, rang a bell, had her dinner removed, and undressed and went to bed. The dawn was in the room and cocks were crowing callously before she slept.

When she awoke, at one o'clock, her mood had again changed—for the first few minutes in which she did not realize were a respite all too brief. She took up her burden again. She took it up once more at the point, How would it affect Harry? . . .

It seemed to her now that she had dismissed that point rather summarily. She had concluded that he would take it bitterly, but that it was his destiny, and had left it there. But now she saw further. Bitterly, of course, he would take it; any man would take it bitterly; but he—oh, most, most bitterly! It would go home to his most central and vital spot—his sense of possession. A trifling instance that bore on the point was still fresh in her memory. Some months before he had bought, for a heavy sum, a piece of porcelain that he had afterwards discovered to bear a fraudulent mark; and she remembered his face as he had deliberated whether he should deal such a blow as should put the flagitious dealer out of business once for all, or whether he should spare him. In the end he had spared him—but the 'sparing' had been worse than the blow itself. The man had crept out of his presence with a soul that henceforward he would hardly dare to call his own. . . . Suppose he should break, as it were, that fraudulent piece over *her* head? Would she be able to bear it that he refrained from crushing her entirely? Could she continue to live on such terms? And what would it cost *him* to bear the Rhadamanthus for ever on his brow? For by as much as he was stricter than other men, by so much would the stroke at his principles be the more mortal. She knew the kind he was. . . .

And—this came with an electrifying shock—a *dead* man too—a few bones in a far-off grave! . . . There was no writing a letter to a dead man, no forbidding a dead man the house! Harry's jealousy of a living intruder had been embittered enough, but a dead man . . . it would be merely deathless. He could have killed Bartholomew, or at least have refrained after the fashion of his refraining in the case

of the dealer ; but who can kill the dead ? He would see that dead man's skull grinning at him for ever from its box under its six foot of Indian earth—grinning at him, a man whom its living eyes had never seen. What, for a man capable of such imaginings, would his withholding be but an unending accusation and reproach ? What, for him, would life thenceforward hold that would be worth the living to obtain ? For which of them, for him or for her, would the days to come wear the more forbidding aspect ? For him, perhaps, since he paid—for her, perhaps, since she was paid for——

The meditation occupied her until an hour after such lunch as she could eat, and then there came a revulsion, a longing almost insupportable to get away from it all. It was that yearning she had felt before, to have done with these terrible men and to fly to one of her own sex. Only yesterday she had called on Mrs. Enright ; she felt that she must call again to-day—it would at least be the putting away of another day of those leaden-footed three. . . . But she would not walk to Mrs. Enright's—ah, no, she would not walk !—she would take a cab every inch of the way there and back. She knew what happened when women walked ; men lay in wait in the Gardens, suddenly raising their hats at their sides and presently crying to them, "*He was your lover—I dare you to deny it—look me in the face and deny it ! . . .*" She hated men. Their kisses shrivelled women's lips, their whispers were horrible in women's ears, and the very way in which they looked made women burn under their garments. Such of them as did not hunt for the mere sport of tracking women down mangled them and broke them on the wheel of their pitiless justice. She dreaded them. Their bodies affrighted her ; their law and their lawlessness alike were granite which women strove to fret into channels with their tears. Women for women when they have bruised themselves against men ; she would go to Mollie Enright again. She, too, had been bruised ; she, too, had been spared nothing ; she understood. . . .

Her cab set her down at Mrs. Enright's door, and she rang the bell at the hour at which she had rung it the day before.

Mrs. Enright was at home, and had, moreover, a pleasant surprise for Berice—a friend of hers. . . .

Berice found herself shaking hands with Bunny.

She hardly knew what she said to Mollie Enright in explanation of her second call, except that her husband had been unexpectedly called away.

“Lords of the earth they are!” Mrs. Enright laughed. “Here Bunny turns up without a word, and yours vanishes! Accountable to nobody for their movements but their own stately selves. . . .”

Berice was wondering whether, as of old, Bunny would take himself off now that she had appeared. He did, within ten barely decent minutes, mumbling as he took her hand some phrase about her happiness. He went out, and Mrs. Enright closed the door behind him.

“How lucky you were just to catch him!” she said. “I expect he’s gone round to Murragh’s studio now. . . . You look tired, dear; let me ring for some fresh tea——”

“What,” Berice asked presently, “are you doing this evening?”

“Accounts,” Mrs. Enright answered promptly. “Those two men said something about going to a music-hall, so I’m deserted.”

“May I stay with you?”

“My dear! Of course you may.”

“Thank you,” Berice murmured.

Mrs. Enright crossed to the sofa and sat down by her side.

“Don’t talk,” she said gently. . . .

There was gratitude in Berice’s heart that Mollie, seeing something was wrong, did not pretend not to see, made no false attempt to be gay, said nothing playful about absent husbands and recent marriages. Instead, she took Berice’s hat and veil off, gave her hot tea, and talked about immaterial things; and Berice divined, without knowing how, that Bunny as well as Neill had spoken to Mollie about her, and that Mollie knew that Bunny loved her. . . . And already Berice was meditating the only boon she would ask when, on the next day but one, she should submit herself to Harry’s judgment. It was that she might be permitted to

unbosom herself to the woman at her side. But Harry first. . . .

They talked until dinner-time, and then dined ; and then Mrs. Enright asked her whether she could not stay for the night.

“ We’re both alone, and we could easily send a message,” she said.

But Berice answered that she must be at her post. . . .

“ Very well ; I won’t press you.”

“ And thank you so very much for having let me come.”

“ Poor girl ! ” said Mrs. Enright, stroking her hand. . . .

Berice took the remark, and the unquestioning look of acceptance and trust which accompanied it, as a matter of course.

She reached home again at ten. A day had gone. Not counting the odd hours of Wednesday, a third of the time had gone. Another day and a night, and the day on which Harry would return would have dawned. . . .

Thursday came. The clocks crawled through the day. Night fell, and with its falling there occurred that which Berice had foreseen. So dull and stale had all become that it was a familiar thing, to be taken for granted, by Harry as much as by herself. Too much thought had overshot its mark. She was petulant, fretful, impatient again. And again, as she lay on her bed in the darkness, the Devil whispered to her. This was on the Friday night.

“ Leave a bad business alone,” the Devil urged. “ Make up your present quarrel with him, submit yourself for the future, and say nothing about the past. The milk’s spilt ; don’t break his heart as well as your own. I tell you you’ll almost kill him, and he won’t be able to help killing you piecemeal. You know what he is . . . Don’t be a fool. Pull yourself together. A little courage, a little hardening are all that is required—you’ve been magnificent before—be so again—leave it alone, leave it alone, leave it alone——”

And from her bed, as she accepted the Devil’s advice and steeled herself to say nothing, she cried aloud in anguish :

“ *Oh, Harry—I cannot, cannot, cannot tell you !* ”

She blessed the soft and fluty voice that saved her—that saved her from herself. It was Saturday morning, and housemaids were washing steps and polishing brasses outside. It was a strange instrument that God chose to employ from out of His machine. . . .

He made no demand this time. Whatever he got would be given him without stipulation. If of her bounty she liked to pay his passage out to Canada, that he might start life afresh. . . .

She looked at the old letter in her own handwriting, and again blessed the man who brought it. The Devil might whisper now ; it didn't matter ; she was secure.

“ There are no others,” he said.

“ It wouldn't matter,” she replied. . . .

That the choice was taken out of her hands she blessed him. She almost uttered words of thanks.

“ I needed this,” she said, her eyes again on the letter in her hand.

“ Yes,” he said.

She gave a faint smile.

“ Oh, not in the way you think. . . . I needed it because he wouldn't have believed me without it.”

“ There are no others,” Walker murmured again.

She gave him the same answer. “ It wouldn't matter. One will do, as evidence, in case he doesn't believe me.—When do you sail ? ”

“ In a week. You may book my passage yourself if—if you're afraid I shan't go——”

“ No, do as you like. If you will wait here——”

Why should she despise him—why judge him at all ? She was paying in money only ; she was about to be paid for presently in tears and blood. . . .

Five minutes later a housemaid moved a bucket to allow him to pass down the steps.

At half-past five that evening she heard the stopping of a cab, Harry's key in the latch, and then his slight, hard, obstinate cough in the hall.

XXII

SHE allowed him, and herself, twenty minutes ; then, with the letter which she had received from Walker in her hand, she tapped at his door.

“Come in,” he called.

She entered, and, as she drew the door to behind her, felt that she was cutting herself off from all assistance save that which she might find in her own soul.

His small kit-bag lay half unpacked on the bed, and he had just washed the dust of his journey from his hands and face. His face was in a towel as she entered. The trifling circumstance fell unhappily. Eager to be reconciled with her, he had intended to advance at once and to kiss her. Their week of estrangement was over, if she would consider it so.

“Ah, darling !” he said, tossing the towel aside and advancing, “I was coming to your room in one moment——”

With her back firmly against the door she made a slight gesture with her hand—a gesture that asked him to keep away from her. He gave a little laugh, and shook his head fondly.

“Eh? What’s that? . . . Oh, that’s all past, darling ; I’ve forgotten all that if you have. I was very, very much annoyed : I spoke hastily ; forgive me, and forget it. You got the letter I left ? I was sorry to go like that, darling——”

He had taken a step nearer. She only repeated the repelling gesture.

“What?” he laughed. . . . “Rubbish ! We’ll both forget all about that nonsense. . . . Why, my dearest, what’s the matter ? Has my girl been fretting ? What a brute I was not to write ! But I thought——”

She moistened her lips. "Harry——" she began, but he interrupted her.

"I was a brute! I might have written—I would have if I'd thought you'd be as upset as this. . . . But I'm no letter-writer, and I admit—it's past now, so that we can speak about it—I admit that for a day or so I was resentful. After that I thought I'd just wait—let you come round—it was stupid of me. . . . And haven't you even got a welcome for me?"

She had, of a sort. He was standing before her, and the door prevented her from shrinking farther back. His arms were extended—she noticed the thin wrists within the turned-back cuffs.

"Don't touch me, please, Harry," she muttered quickly, as he made another movement.

But he only assumed a headstrong jocularly. "Not touch you? . . . Fiddlesticks! Kiss your husband at once, when he tells you!——"

But she cried again, sharply, "Don't touch me, Harry." He fell a little back.

"Why, what ails you, dear?" he cried. "You're surely not still remembering. . . . Come, Berice; I've begged your pardon; I do so unreservedly; don't be so odd about it——"

She moistened her lips again. "I've something to say to you at once. But please first go a little further away."

Slowly he retired. Mechanically he fastened his cuff-links, and then took up his coat and began to put it on. "You're very odd, dear," he said. "What is it you have to say? Please say it, and then we'll go on."

He meant, "Say it, and then come and kiss your husband," and she wondered whether he would wish to kiss her when she had said it. His eyes were on hers; she could almost mark the little slow processes by which a mistrust was being born. She kept her station at the door.

She began again. "I've something very important to say to you, at once. It—it affects you. When—when you've heard it I—I place myself unreservedly in your hands."

"Oh?" he said, still watching her. . . . "Well, better say it, whatever it is."

Again her dry lips worked, and she could not keep her eyes in one place.

"At first," she went on with increasing difficulty, "I—I wasn't going to tell you. Half a dozen times I wasn't going to tell you. But now—oh, I can't live another day unless I do!—"

"Oh? . . . Well——?" His eyes were now unwinking.

"I must—I must tell you—and yet God only knows how I shall! I've tried to pray——"

At her last words his tall, poplar-like figure seemed to stiffen a little. He frowned. "To pray?" he said. . . . "About what?"

"Oh, for strength!" it came out. "No, not for strength neither—for a little help in my weakness!" Her hands were making little pathetic movements against the panels of the door behind her.

His brow had swiftly gathered at a thought. "Berice——" he said heavily.

"Harry——" she began at the same moment.

"I'm listening. . . ."

"Harry——"

But now that the moment had arrived it refused to come out. He waited through a long silence, his frown slowly deepening and his look gathering a rigour; then, as she still remained dumb, he took matters into his own hands.

"This appears to be serious," he said slowly. "You say you've something to say, something important, and still you don't say it. And you say it affects me. Be so good as to answer me a question. Does it affect me as—as your husband?"

"I'm afraid, Harry——"

"Please answer without equivocation."

Her head dropped. "Yes," she breathed.

"*A-h!*——" His voice shook three distinct times on the monosyllable. . . . "Well, I'm waiting," he informed her presently. . . .

But he was still waiting at the end of another half-minute.

Then slowly he drew up a chair, took up his trousers at the knees, and sat down. She still stood with fallen head at the door. There seemed a fitness in their respective attitudes.

"Well, I'm waiting . . ." he said again presently.

Again she could get no further than his name—"Harry!" It became plain to him that if he was to have it out of her, whatever it was, he must dig it out. He sat slowly upright in his chair.

"You say," he said with deliberation, "that what you have to say affects me in my relation to you. Things have happened in the past, not very long ago, that I came back quite prepared to forget; and this is my reception. You also mention praying. I confess you make me afraid—you make me afraid. . . . Will you please, before we go any further, tell me how you have spent the last three days?"

Her groan had escaped her before she could muster an effort to suppress it. "Oh, God, in an agony!" it broke from her.

He drew out his handkerchief, half raised it to his brow, and then put it back into his pocket again.

"So?" he said heavily. . . . "I'm inclined to believe you. I've only to look at you to believe you. . . . Will you go on?"

But she could not, and again he stiffened in his chair.

"Well, if we're reduced to catechizing, it must be so. I said you made me afraid. I will tell you what it is you make me afraid of. Have you done something that I expressly forbade you to do?"

It flashed on her what he meant; she had forgotten that smaller thing. She checked the cry of affright that rose to her lips, and her head knocked against the door with her sharp throw up of it.

"No, no, no!" she cried.

The flame was kindling in his eyes.

"No? . . . I wouldn't say that, Berice," he admonished. Then his accusation rang out as sharply as if iron had been smitten. "You've seen him!"

"No, no—yes, yes, yes!—but——"

"A-a-a-h!" Again there was that beat and shake in the monosyllable. "You *have*? . . ."

“ Oh, Harry, listen to me ! ” she implored wildly.

The slight abating of that rage in his eyes was hardly less ominous than the rage itself. “ Yes, I’ll listen to you,” he said in a smothered voice, “ I’ll listen to you. You’ve seen him, against my express orders—I don’t say wishes now. . . . Well ? ”

“ It was an accident, oh, it was an accident ! ” she cried. “ I wasn’t even thinking of him ! I was thinking. . . . I was coming across the Park, and met him——”

He rose from his chair.

“ The Park. You were coming across the Park and you met him. That was in public. Now look at me—look at me, I say. Have you seen him in private—is *that* what you mean ? ”

“ Not for an instant ! ” she almost shrieked.

“ No again ? . . . You have ! ” he cried, glaring. “ You have, and you’ve the decency left not to kiss me. Thank you for that ! ”

“ No, no, no ! ” she shrieked again. “ It’s nothing—what I have to tell you—it’s nothing, nothing, nothing to do with that—with him ! ”

There it was on his brow, the Rhadamanthus she had feared. His eyes probed her unsparingly. . . .

“ Well,” he said slowly at last, “ say I believe you. Say for the moment I believe you. It has nothing whatever to do with him, you say. It has to do with somebody. Who *has* it to do with ? ”

Again at the starting-point, she stood silent and gulping. He continued to watch her, to note her low-roving eyes and the working of her throat as she swallowed.

Then Emney took a resolve. Though she should not speak for an hour, she should speak without any further assistance from him. He drew the chair to him again and resumed his seat.

It was some minutes before she began again, in a low voice.

“ When I married you, Harry—that day I promised to marry you—something was spoken of that I insisted on calling a bargain.”

He nodded, but did not speak. She gulped again.

"It was a bargain," she faltered.

"It was," he slipped significantly into her pause. . . .

"You said you loved me," she continued, "and I—I advised you to leave me alone——"

He didn't say the words, but his look told her that were she to advise him so again she might do so with better success.

"I told you about myself—about myself—you remember . . ."

"Well?"

"—and that I'd loved somebody else, and that you—you took the risk of that . . . and you said you were willing to take it—and you did take it—you took it——"

"Well?"

Her fists, her teeth, her very eyelids were clenched.

"He was my lover," she muttered. . . .

He had placed his fingers tip to tip. "So you said at the time," he remarked across them.

But her arms shot quickly out. Her head rocked wildly from side to side. A few minutes before she had cried "No, no!" as a denial; she now cried it as an affirmation.

"No, no! You didn't understand! I don't think you understood! I thought then that you did, but now——"

"Now? . . ." he said, separating the finger tips and leaning slightly forward.

"Now I know you didn't understand! My lover—my lover—take the word in any sense you like, only for pity's sake *say you understand!*"

The bed was three paces from her. She put out one foot, followed it clumsily with the other, and fell face downwards across the coverlet, her arms outspread.

He did not move. He had not yet realized. That thunderous mood of judgment in him had acquired a momentum of its own that still ran on for a moment automatically. Under the influence of that momentum he spoke once more.

"Yes—you told me that—you said, if I remember rightly——"

It was then, in the middle of his sentence, that the momentum failed, as if some brake had been applied. Every working member of his mind was brought up standing. One

more unmeasurable gap of time passed ; he sat braced and stiffened as something, he knew not what, seemed to be rushing towards him ; and then, with a sound that was half a sob, half a cough, wholly ghastly, he took the entire knowledge into his soul. . . .

At last, at last, it was done ! The rotten branch that had dammed the stream of her life was now removed. . . .

He sat motionless in his chair ; she lay motionless on the bed ; not the sound of a breath came from either. . . . Minutes passed, and still neither moved. . . . Then she turned her head a little on the quilt, and saw him. . . .

She knew not what it was that immediately put into her head the thought of the revolver that lay in the drawer in the adjoining dressing-room. More minutes passed, and again she stole a look at his face. Their eyes, as she turned hers, met, but his seemed to be quite unseeing. There was no need for her to move a little out of the way of that fixed, annihilated stare, but move she did. Those hard corneas of his did not alter by a fraction their line of direction. She wondered whether they would even be conscious of light or darkness. . . .

And it was for him to speak now, not her. She had said all she had to say. . . .

Again the minutes slipped away.

At last he did speak—she knew not after how many minutes of silence this was. His voice might have come from an artificial, galvanized man ; it was difficult to believe that the sound that reached her ears was produced by lips and tongue and lungs of flesh.

“ Why do you tell me this . . . now ? ” the low sound came.

Then the sound was lost in another long silence. . . .

And she, who had foreacted this scene a hundred times, each time with a new and dreadful variant—who had told herself that she owed it to herself to tell him—who had spoken of his destiny, that he must bear—she, seeing him like this, wondered why she had told him . . . now. He was a sight to turn away the eyes from. She could only hope that, like the wretch broken on the wheel, he might be

so shattered by the first stroke that he could laugh at those that followed. . . .

But the voice had come again.

"Why do you tell me this . . . now?" it repeated. Harry's eyes still kept their unvarying stare.

The quilt stifled the voice in which she replied. "Because—because—I couldn't bear it any more——"

She wondered whether he would say, "*You* bear!" but he didn't. He said nothing. Mechanically she lifted herself on the bed. . . .

The next moment, without previous intention, she had cried out in a loud voice:

"Harry!" she cried sharply, "you must kill me! You must let me kill myself! There's no other end to this!"

He was about to say something, but an attack of coughing took him. . . . At the end of it he sat making minute movements with his lips. . . .

"Eh?" he said, his eyes once more fixed. . . . "Yes. . . . No, I mean. . . ."

Then, slowly, with his weight borne by the hands that grasped the arms of his chair, he lifted himself up. Dragging his feet after him, he moved towards the glass. Then, as if he walked more easily for the practice, he passed to the other end of the room. Several times he passed back and forth, and then he sat heavily down again. His eyes resumed their old attitude.

But they kept it only for a short time. All at once, and for the first time, they met hers with a message in them. He drew out his handkerchief and blew his nose loudly; the occupation engrossed him; and then again his eyes rested on hers. She was standing by the bed now.

He spoke quietly.

"That'll do for to-night," he said. "If you'll wait till morning. . . . I must think, you see—I must think. . . . Yes, if you'll wait till morning . . . in the morning. Don't do anything till then—I heard what you said—I must think. That will do for to-night. In the morning . . . if ten o'clock would be convenient to you . . . we'll have the rest then."

His eyes left her and began to stare as before. They

did not change as she moved slowly to the door. With the open door in her hand she turned once to look at him ; then, with the letter she had intended to give him still in her hand, crumpled to unrecognizability, she passed out.

Until ten o'clock in the morning. . . . And then ?

She went to her own room.

Well, she thought dully (this was some time later ; at first she thought nothing), she was indeed his property now. Until ten o'clock in the morning, when she was to see him again, her very soul was his. Until he should bid her do so, she might not even make away with herself ; her feet might not lead her to where the revolver lay in the drawer in his dressing-room, her fingers might not turn off and on again the tap of a gas. He had condemned her to live until ten o'clock in the morning, and live she must. She would rather not have lived, but " Don't do anything till then—I heard what you said," he had said. . . . Only three days before her own cry had been, " If he lets me go on living he'll be bountiful to me " ; now she thought it would be a bounty in him to let her die. . . . In the meantime he was paying—probably sitting in the same chair with his eyes unchangingly before him, thinking, thinking. . . .

Nor could she pray ; she had not strength to pray. It seemed to her that that suspended judgment of his stood between her and her God—that even to pray would be, somehow, to do something behind his back. She could only wait—wait for the striking of ten o'clock to-morrow. . . . Possess her ? He possessed her that night as he had never possessed her before. Not to be able to destroy herself—not to be able to save herself—until ten o'clock in the morning . . . yes, that was possession. The very thing he thought he had no longer, that he had for the first time ; strange that he should possess her only in the moment when he was made aware that he had never possessed her ! . . .

Well, he was paying, sitting there in his chair, coughing himself scarlet from time to time and making that minute movement of his lips after each attack. She fancied she heard his cough as she rose and went into an adjoining room for biscuits—for she had neither lunched nor dined that day,

and she was faint. She wondered whether he had switched the light on, or whether he was paying in the darkness, as she was. . . .

“As she was?” . . . The thought was new to her, new and arresting. . . . Was *she* actually paying a little—contributing her mite—diminishing her own debt though only by ever so little? The thought came with a little numbing shock. . . . And yet, as she grew accustomed to the novelty of it, she felt that it was true. She was, actually, dropping something into the pardon-box that, whether at ten o'clock in the morning he bade her live or die, could not but give her something of the precious gift of herself again. She could not drop tears yet: tears might come later. For the present she could only drop, one by one as they came, the sacrifices of the pangs and shudderings and burnings of her now unstruggling spirit. . . . In ceasing to struggle against that divine thing in herself, which she had never totally lost, she was paying all that could yet be paid; but the day, though not seen yet, might come when she would owe no man nor woman anything. . . .

She endured, not knowing what she did for herself, throughout the night. Day broke greyly, the day on which, live or die, her soul was to be made her own. The night had seen her *De Profundis*, and she was no longer entirely at the mercy of the accidents and betrayals of Life. She was shivering and faint; she had only partly undressed and drawn the coverlet over her; and she was stiff. But she was hopeful; whether life thenceforward held joy for her or not, it held peace; and she suddenly found herself, she knew not why, thinking of Mollie Enright. . . .

At eight o'clock she rose, dressed, descended, and, letting herself quietly out of the house, took a walk along the Embankment. It was half-past nine when she returned. To breakfast was an imperative physical necessity, and her meal occupied her until five minutes to ten. It was striking ten when she went upstairs again and knocked at the door of Harry's room.

He, too, had breakfasted; a small tray with a teapot and remains of dry toast lay on a chair by his bedside. He ap-

peared to have been to bed, but he was up, shaved and dressed, and had opened his window, the curtains of which floated into the room on the morning breeze. He appeared calm, and he placed a chair for her by the window. He himself did not sit, but walked about, his hands behind him, his head down-hung. There was no morning greeting.

He looked fixedly at the carpet as he began.

"First," he said, "I ought to say that I take what you told me last night in its most literal sense."

"Thank you," she murmured hardly audibly. She was grateful to him for that.

"It is in your power," he resumed, picking his words carefully and again pacing the floor, "it is in your power to claim that you told me all this before. (No; I should like to say what I have to say before you speak) . . . You can, as I say, claim that you told me all that before. One's memory isn't exactly to be depended on to recall everything that passes in a moment of stress, and you may make that claim. I've tried to remember all, every word; of course I can't; but I've remembered enough, perhaps, for you to warrant you if you like to say that."

He paused, and she assumed permission to speak.

"I don't make that claim. If I may tell you the only claim I do make——"

"Yes."

"It is—as you say, it was a moment of stress—it is that I had long resolved not to marry anybody without being perfectly open, that when you spoke to me I was still quite firm about that, and that at the time I believed that as far as words could go I had concealed nothing."

He had nodded his head once or twice.

"Yes, yes. What I remember bears you out perfectly in that. . . . Let me say that I have one great anxiety at present: it is to be scrupulously just in all this. I am terribly anxious about that. Very well. There's a question I'm sorry to have to ask you, but I'm bound to put it. I'm sure you'll answer me freely. It is, whether you loved him."

She hesitated barely an instant. "I did not," she said. "I hope I needn't say that for a little time I thought I did,

but that didn't last long. It lasted, to be precise, four months. No, I found I was mistaken in thinking I loved him."

He nodded, as if at a point grasped.

"And he?—I don't ask this because I want to press matters, but it is vital."

This time she hesitated longer. "He—is dead," she said slowly. "That makes it difficult to speak of him. But I think—I think—that you may take the same answer. He also thought he loved me."

"And discovered he didn't?"

"And discovered he didn't."

He had stopped to put his two questions; he now resumed his walk, and spoke with his back towards her and his hands behind him.

"Then," he said, "from my point of view it resolves itself into this: whether it is better that there should have been love between you, or whether there shouldn't. You'll see that in some respects it would have been simpler if there *had* been love. In others, perhaps not. I don't know yet."

"I daren't tell you anything but the truth," she said humbly. "It was as I have said."

"That you thought you loved one another—as you thought you told me certain things that day in Cotterdale?"

"Yes."

"And you believe now that in both cases you were mistaken?"

"Yes."

He took another turn of the room before speaking again.

"And—I'm compelled to ask you this too—you don't think there's anything you're saying *now*, or are likely to say, that there's much chance of your turning out to be similarly mistaken in, I suppose?"

It was not a gentle question, and it was useless when asked. She could only shake her head, achingly smiling. "Ah, not now!"

"Or anything you're *not* saying, that might come to the same thing? . . ."

Ah, this, of the hundred possible turns, was the turn it

was taking ! She had hoped it might take a better one. . . . She faltered.

“ If it’s my truthfulness you’re questioning, you may rest easy. There’s not only nothing I’m not prepared to say—there’s nothing I shan’t beg to be allowed to say. I want you to know everything. Shall I say it now, or wait till you’ve finished ? ”

“ Now, please.”

“ Then,” she said in a faint voice, “ there are things that—that—that will make it still harder for you. You don’t know how to ask me about them, of course, so I must tell you. I shall have said all when I say that—that—that the thing is not absolutely a secret.”

Why did he now suddenly wince at the lesser thing when he had borne the greater one with at least the appearance of fortitude ? He did wince, and his lips parted with a little spasm, showing his teeth for a moment.

“ As you say, I don’t know how to put questions,” he said significantly, with a twitching face. . . .

“ I’ll tell you in as few words as I can. Then—may Heaven help you ! . . . First, Bernal Hartopp knows ; how, I don’t know ; he knew both of us intimately ; but naturally he’s never spoken of it to me, and would die, I know, rather than do so to anybody else.—Next, his friend Neill came so near the thing one day that I was driven to mislead him—to lie to him,” she quickly corrected the palliatory word. “ I had to tell him we’d been lovers, knowing the innocent sense he’d take it in, and he thought me magnificent. So far as I know, he still thinks so, and has probably spoken of my magnificence to Mrs. Enright.—Next——” she saw again that twitch of his face as she said “ next,” but continued resolutely, “ next, a man from India got possession of some of my letters, which I bought back for a sum of money—it was five hundred pounds, and it was paid on the day I was married to you——”

Suddenly Emney struck at his forehead with both fists, and gave an “ Oh ! ” that was almost a howl.—“ *Oh ! . . .*”

“ ——and,” she continued, her eyes haggardly on him, “ I bought this other, this final letter—it is here, a little

crumpled, I'm afraid—for a minor sum yesterday, in order that the man might clear out of the country.—The five hundred pounds was the sum you remarked on when we were abroad.”

“That——!” he groaned.

“Yes. You thought I carried it about with me.”

“What? . . . Oh, no, I didn't. I thought your uncle had it,” he said between his teeth.

She, too, enduring a greater thing, found a special poignancy in the smaller one. *Everard!* . . . The thing involved her gentle, easy-going uncle also! . . . Of other innocents caught in that mesh she already knew; but Everard—and for a sum of money! . . .

“Oh, don't wrong him a moment longer,” she said mournfully; “it was my doing, and you can hardly wrong me.”

“Ah!” Again it came from an orifice of gums and teeth. “I should like—one moment—I should like—before we go any further, please—to hear of somebody who *doesn't* know _____”

For a moment she closed her eyes . . . but she must go on.

“The remaining man who knows—who's guessed, I don't know how—people are better guessers than I thought—who guessed, and saw when he threw it in my face that it was true—is Mr. Bartholomew.”

No groan could have expressed Emney's misery as did the “Yes” that came from him with a little outrush of breath. He folded his arms on the lower rail of the bed and buried his face in them. For a minute she watched the working of his shoulders. . . . When he stood upright again his own suffering overshadowed all else in the world—blinded him completely to the heroism of the thing she was doing.

“And is that all?” he demanded.

“Do you mean all the people who—know—or guess?”

“All of anything—all you have to say to me—all I'm to be told—anything——”

“No. There's one thing more. I left it only because it might appear to tell in my favour.”

“It shall.”

“ Mr. Bartholomew made love to me. This is what I was trying to say last night when I was so distracted. It was in the Park. I was coming home from Mrs. Enright’s, wretched, wretched, but even then I wasn’t going to tell you everything. I was only going to patch it up with you. But after I’d seen that man. . . . Oh, you were right about him, and I was hideously wrong ! I ought never to have looked at him. One more thing, and this is the last. On Friday night I felt that I could never, never tell you. Again I’d resolved not to tell you. Then yesterday morning that other man came with the last letter. . . . That ended my last cowardice. I thanked God for sending him.—And that is all.”

“ All ? ”

“ All. But give me one moment to think. If there’s anything more it’s only that I’ve forgotten it—not that I’m hiding it——”

“ All ! ” he repeated, and again began to pace the room.

He groaned from time to time as fresh facets of the exquisite thing flashed and rayed within him. There were moments in which he seemed calmer, and then again it came upon him, shaking him as a gust shakes a sapling. This lasted for minutes ; then, as he was passing her again on the outward journey to the other end of the room, he suddenly turned and paused and looked at her. She had closed her eyes, but she opened them again as he spoke to her in a voice that quavered pitifully.

“ I’m afraid—I’m afraid,” he said, “ I said ten o’clock this morning—I’m afraid I shall have to ask for a little more time——”

Again a blackness rushed across her heavens. A great sickness swept her. *More time ! . . .*

“ Oh ! ” she cried, harrowed. “ Not that—do it now, now ! Anything but that ! I am yours to kill, but not to torture !——”

He gave her a mournful look. “ Is it torture ? ” he asked. It was not irony ; he was not slashing at her ; as two who had known one another on earth, meeting in hell, might make comparisons, he merely wanted to know whether she was tortured too. . . .

With an " *Oh, dear God!* " she collapsed and fell half out of her chair.

Again he walked about . . . his hands went to his head from time to time. . . .

But presently through her stupor she heard his voice again. His words came to her as if through some dense and sluggish medium.

" How can I? how can I? . . . Newly hearing all this? . . . The decision I make now is binding on us both . . . and I'm not to have time to think. . . . "

But so that he made it now and got it over she did not care to what that decision bound her. He was standing before her, looking down on her, but she made no further sign.

And even he, bigoted, rigid, freshly torn in halves, could not but be sensible of the completeness of her avowal. Had she shown resistance in as much as a finger of her his way would have appeared clearer to him; but she half sat in, half hung out of her chair, ready for any stroke he might deal her. How *could* he crush one so defenceless? How could he even tell her, so plainly incapable of enduring more, that she must endure for another day? He did not know that in another day his course would appear one whit more clearly. . . . No, he was not without compassion. He could not, could not do it. At ten o'clock, resolved on one point but ignorant of the horrible perfection of the whole, his decision had been taken; he had decided to spare her; but—what now?

Swiftly a question put itself to him. If he did not still spare her, he must conclude that he was less deeply pierced by the primary fact than by the secondary complications. *Was that so?* . . .

The question answered itself. It was not so. It was the primary fact that mattered, and if consequences were bound up in it, so much the worse. Consequences modified, but did not overturn. The load was heavier than he had conceived it to be overnight, but it must none the less be borne. Already he saw what that burden would involve—the jealous mistrust of occasions until the end of his days—armour never

for an instant doffed—the weapon never out of his hand for his defence and hers—and farewell for ever to the tranquil composing to sleep at the end of the day. Yet he must assume that load. Whether he could bear it, or whether it would end by crushing him, remained in the hands of God; he only saw that he must take it up. She must be spared. . . .

His face was buried in his folded arms on the bed rail again. He raised it. It was a haggard agglomeration of strands of muscle. It became the more haggard as his eyes fell on her.

“Berice——” he said in a dull voice.

She did not reply.

“You have told me all—everything?”

“I don’t know—I don’t know,” she moaned. “I’ve told you all I know, but all the world may have been told by this time—I don’t care——”

“And you, Berice, and myself? . . . What are we to do? . . .”

She no longer greatly cared about that either.

“Berice,” he said, his hand on the bed-rail, his face pathetically transfigured, “I’ll try.”

She sat suddenly upright in the chair. Her eyes ranged wildly. She strove to take in the full meaning of his words.

“I’ll try,” he said again. “If it’s too much for me at the finish I—I can’t help that. I can’t think clearly yet, you see, and yet I’ve got to make a decision. Very well; I make it. It is that I will try.”

Her hand had flown to her breast.

“You’ll try . . . to forgive me?” she cried unbelievably.

He, too, as she had formerly, honestly believed in that moment what he said. “I do—I think I do—forgive you. I’ll try—not to let it make any difference——”

Her hand was still at her breast, the fingers working, as if she would have stilled her violently pumping heart by clutching at it. For an instant she swayed and threw her head back; she made as if to cast her face upon his feet; but it was a yard from his feet that she swooned in a huddle

on the floor. He threw himself with a cry beside her. As his eyes roved about the upper spaces of the room his lips framed the name of God. Then he gathered her hard to him. As he hoped to receive mercy, so he showed her such mercy as was in him. . . .

It was a few minutes later, as he strove to lift her into her chair again, that he had his first hæmorrhage.

XXIII

IF leave might be taken to interpose a parable, that parable would run something like this :

When the steersman of the mutinied crew, knowing no more of compass and card than that in the days of the old pilot who had been compelled to walk the plank the slender balanced needle had never varied from its northward position, had conceived the idea that there was virtue in the mere fact of the needle's stationariness, and, seeking to ensure stability for ever, had nailed it fast and nodded off to sleep, he had done no more than the man or woman wilful and persistent in error does. And when, after many days of disaster, a younger member of the crew had perchance remembered that, though the needle had ever pointed northward in the old pilot's lifetime, it had nevertheless always swung freely, and, calling a council and putting the matter to the vote, had knocked the falsely perpetuating nail out again, nothing had happened that does not happen when repentance wrings the human soul. From fixity in error the released needle sweeps half round the card until even in its search for rightness it commits an error of equal magnitude in the opposite direction. Thence, with scarcely a pause, it swings back again well-nigh to its former position, and thence back again, and yet back, oscillating as if it would never settle to rest at all. Yet unless its long-maintained false attitude to the compelling pole have completely demagnetized it, it does settle to rest. The proposer of the removal of the nail probably swings at the yard-arm, fallen upon by his fellows, who saw only the disorder he had produced ; yet the needle settles at last to rest. This is true of revolutions, of the nailing down of truth to dogma, and of that bearer of an

index-needle magnetized by the slow induction of God—the human soul.

It was true of Berice. That released needle, her Conscience, swung clear over, clear past the point of her duty, into error so oppositely wide that she asked herself with bitter groans whether things would not have been better left alone. Why strive to mend one error only to commit another? Why swing back again to the original error? And why veer round again, and again, and yet again? . . . The needle must have lost its virtue. . . .

She did not know that in that case it would not have swung at all—that the strength of its so sickening oscillations was precisely the measure of the virtue in it.

For, far overshooting the pole-star of her Duty, she swept round to fantastic and impossible sacrifices. Her life must be a continuous offering, each moment a new kindling, each breath she drew a fresh oblation. Canonization was too little for Harry; she must deify. In him she felt there could be no variation nor shadow of turning. He had forgiven her—he had said so—and it was godlike to forgive. . . . Her soul was still at times all Harry's. She had begun to pay, had given earnest, but did not yet possess herself.

Then came the dizzy sweep back to despair. Again she grovelled in spirit. The dream of bright, impossible sacrifices had already forsaken her, and heaviness and obscurity were about her again. Of what use to struggle longer, since struggling but plunged her back into the night? Better to have left the needle nailed; better, far better, never to have told him! . . .

And so back to the sacrifices again, and thence once more to despair. . . .

Yet the swings became less wild, she held herself more steadily, meanings appeared, and, when they disappeared again, dipped only a little below her horizon. Presently suffering taught her, even when she was on the outward course of aberration, to look forward to the return again. . . .

Then her Duty appeared, though still a little waveringly, before her.

The Tracys, the Howitts, Lady Haverford, Mrs. Enright, any of these would gladly have taken her out of town when June passed, and with the coming of July London's trees grew grey with dust and London's pavements glared and reeked; but she declined all invitations. Harry was unable to leave, and she would not leave his side. Some "reconstruction" was toward at the bank, of which Berice only vaguely understood one thing, namely, that it was to give Harry that reward for which he had planned and worked for so long—freedom definitely to retire from business altogether. He sat up at night with papers before him, and brought governors and directors home to dinner. He spoke less to her than he had formerly done, but for the first time in their intercourse she was happy, without preoccupation, and at peace in his company. Sometimes he kissed her, almost passionately, without apparent reason; and she took these kisses as tokens of her rehabilitation, and returned them with gentle fervour. Sometimes when he kissed her thus she felt her heart so full that she had to leave the room hastily, that he also might not be overcome.

For that was the first feeble step she had taken towards her duty—to allow all, if it would, to rest, sink, die. He had been great enough to pardon, and if out of that pardon there was ever to spring a new, tender, budding, hopeful sprout it could only be on the condition that she also refrained from disturbing that yet too thin covering that lay over the corpse of her old error. That which she could never forget she must appear never to remember; her recognitions and prostrations took place within herself. Not a word of it all ever passed between them. He was assiduous in taking her here and there, to plays, receptions, galleries. The health of his body and the comfort of his soul became her hourly solicitude. If she had never loved him before she would have said that she loved him then. That fair, young, hopeful, sprouting thing was Love. . . .

The shiver that passed over her soul when, like the sudden dying-out of the brightness of things as a thin cloud darkens the summer day, she was for the first time affrighted by the surmise that it was better with her than it was with him,

came on a sultry day early in September. For two days he had spoken little, and all that morning he had been closeted with his 'reconstruction' papers and had had lunch sent in to him. Then, very worn and tired-looking, he had come into the drawing-room, where Berice was arranging flowers. He had crossed to her and had embraced her with such overstrained fervour that she had felt suddenly uneasy. She had looked again at his tired face.

"Dear, you are working too hard," she had murmured, cherishing him.

"No—no—no," he had murmured listlessly. "Kiss me again, Berice."

And again had come that slightly unnatural enlacing. Then he had dragged himself from it almost by violence, and had walked quickly out of the room, leaving her standing there. . . .

It was then that that quick surmise came, and she shivered. It was not the first time he had thus flown to her, as if his need of her was a hunger that must be instantly satisfied. *Why* that almost ravening hunger? *Why* this almost brutal appeasing? It could not, could not be that he was weakening? . . .

Then the knowledge came over her like a deluge. These demonstrations of love were made, not for her, but for himself. He was *telling himself* that he loved her—whipping himself to it—filling with empty observances and clamorous proofs the narrow gap that had already opened and was widening between them. All was *not* the same. It was *not* 'making no difference.' He was beginning to fail in his resolve. . . .

And his failure was taking *that* mocking form!

The feeling of desolation that surged up in her was for him, not for herself. She saw. He was torn in two. Half of him, the just half that a little mercy had leavened, still loved her; but the other half, the jealous possessive half into which she had thrust the barb, was writhing again. And he knew it too, and sought to allay the inner pain by the plastering on of the salves of endearment. He kissed her in desperation. Those kisses were the feeble weapons with which he

fought for her, for himself, for that new and weak thing, their love. . . .

And she could only look on, without a word, at the warfare that was already wearing him down. . . .

That same night she learned how right she was in her surmise. He made his health the excuse for the proposal he submitted to her. Twice a fit of coughing had left his handkerchief stained with red, and a certain proximity, he said, could hardly be good for her. . . .

The knowledge that for the present at any rate he wanted less of her sunk slowly into her soul.

"I want to be with you, Harry," she murmured brokenly.

"Much better not," he said, looking away. "You know what . . ."

She knew what the words and the significant pause that followed them meant. It was now with her as in that moment of madness she had told Bartholomew it was. . . .

"Oh, Harry," she murmured again sadly, "don't drive me away from you. . . ."

But he said again that it wouldn't be right. "Not until I'm a little better, at all events," he said. "When this reconstruction work's done we'll go abroad—we'll go to Algiers for the winter if you like—but until then it would be best as I say. . . ."

Her head dropped. Her surmise had been doubly right. Even in his kisses that which he thought he had vanquished in himself had shown itself strong again, and now the kisses themselves were forbidden. She was to appear to believe the unfrankness about his health. Oh, what was to become of that new and gentle thing for which she had begun to hope? . . .

"You really think it is best?" she asked submissively.

"I do."

"Then it must be as you wish."

They separated.

But not for long—not longer than a week. The power over him she least desired, that she still had. They came together again. . . .

They separated again.

Separation, reunion, and separation again determined

towards a *modus vivendi*. His dressing-room now became her sleeping apartment, whence she could be at his side in a moment should he be seized in the night.

These seizures were at once her dread and her consolation. Everard had once said that Nature had never intended her for a nurse ; impulse overrode her judgment too frequently, and even the will to help was not always with her. Yet it brought all the woman crowding up into her bosom to think, when his attacks came, that he should be so dependent on her, who in other things hung upon his pleasure and commands. She had no thought of establishing a *contra* account with him as a set-off ; that she could never do ; but only to be allowed to give of her care and love and mothering came over her spirit with the sweetness of a healing juice. Things had changed since she had so reluctantly obeyed Mrs. Finch-Ommaney's summons to Undershaws. . . .

Yet out of these very crises a circumstance more distressing than all the rest arose. Those hours in which he forgot all else in her arms she knew ; she knew, too, those other hours in which he avoided meetings with her or even fled her presence outright ; but the querulousness and irritation that followed his attacks was a compound of the two things terribly difficult to handle. She did not always know what to attribute to himself and what to his sickness. And she did not know how to attribute it when one evening he suddenly spoke, though without either irritation or querulousness, of the thing that hitherto had not once been mentioned between them.

" Berice," he said suddenly, after half an hour's silence—he was sitting in his bedroom clad in his dressing-gown, and in his tone there seemed somehow to be the assumption that she was already aware of the turn things were taking and might even be supposed not to be entirely ignorant of his private train of thought—" I don't know, after all, that we're going the best way about things."

She did not instantly take his meaning. " The best way ? " she repeated.

" Yes. The way we're taking," he replied. " I can only hope it is, and that we shall be able to manage."

"Manage? . . . The way we're taking? . . ." she echoed.

"Of silence," he said, with a meaning look.

She saw. . . .

It was a minute before she replied. "The choice rests with you, Harry," she said, hardly above a whisper. "Say what you want to do."

"Yes," he answered absently. . . . Then he resumed. "It's a question of policy, you see—of seeing whether the same end can't be better attained by other means."

"Other means than silence . . ." she faltered. It was not a comment, but rather an acknowledgment that she had heard.

"Other than silence," he repeated. "Silence merely means that we're avoiding the thing. It's as if a great rock had been plumped down into the middle of our lives and we walked round and round it, you and I, pretending to each other we don't know it's there—pretending to ourselves we don't know it's there."

She shook her head sadly. "Not to ourselves, Harry."

"Well, we'll say doing a rather ridiculous thing about it, anyway. I've been wondering whether it's the best way after all."

She did not answer. What was there for her, seeing what was coming, to answer?

"I've been wondering," he continued, "whether open admissions aren't better than tacit ones."

She produced her voice with difficulty. "Do you mean—we're to—speak of it?"

"That's what I've been wondering."

She was profoundly moved. Presently she asked heart-brokenly, "Has it been—so hard?"

He answered evasively, perhaps a little ashamed.

"That at least we needn't talk about. No good going into that. You see, nobody can help speaking a good deal from their own point of view, and to do so is only selfishness beyond a certain point. But that isn't answering the question. I feel that all the time there's something accumulating between us that must find an outlet sooner or later—a sort of safety-valve——"

Ah, yes! she sadly mused: a sort of safety-valve—a perpetual little spluttering and hissing, a continual little cloud about the nozzle. It was to relieve the pressure within; it was that or an explosion. . . .

And was a new love to be born out of that? . . .

“Oh, Harry!—” she choked.

“Well,” he persisted doggedly, perhaps more ashamed still, “the other way doesn’t seem altogether a success.”

She lifted weary, sad eyes to him.

“And have it fresh every morning—never, *never* forgotten?”

Again he showed compunction. He moved uneasily. “I’ve admitted I’m thinking for the moment of myself,” he said shortly. “That doesn’t mean that you also aren’t to be thought of at the same time. It’s a question that affects both of us, and I suppose we’ve both rights as well as obligations. I’m merely telling you quite honestly what I think. . . . Anyway, we needn’t bother about it to-night. We’ll see how we go on. I merely mention it, that’s all. . . .”

But in speaking of whether the thing was to be mentioned he had already mentioned it. It was out of the scope of his nature that not everything that exists may safely be named, and he had no difficulty in dressing out his idea with all manner of plausibilities. . . . Difficulty? Not he! It was there, the rock that had been plumped down into the garden of their lives; it might even be held to demand speech in proportion to the difference it made. True, that might be to take away piecemeal what he had magnanimously granted in the lump, but what else could he do? The thing was merely stronger than he, and what he could not do by force he must compass in some other way. . . . Anyway, there was no hurry; they would see what was to be done. . . .

It was in his ailing hours more than all that she could not but be aware of what was passing in his breast. He struggled desperately, in what was plainly already a losing fight. Far from being without variation or shadow of turning, he was a tortured man, fighting to his last ounce for the pair of them, pitying the pair of them, but sometimes pitying himself more than he pitied her. For example:

"What was that saying," he asked suddenly one night—she had thought he was reading—"what was that saying you told me that morning when you showed me round your uncle's mill? Some local saying or other——"

"Saying——?" she asked, at a loss.

"Yes—some saying or other about a nail."

"About a nail? . . . Do you mean 'A Nail in the Stocks'?"

"Ah, yes; that was it!——"

That was all: presently he appeared to be reading again; but she apprehended perfectly. As a nail sometimes tore the cloth in the trough of the fulling-mill, so there was a nail that rent the web of their lives. . . .

Again: they had visited a play together, a modern play, based on the institution of marriage, in which it was advanced that that estate was something to be contracted and contracted out of again at the personal convenience of the parties. Afterwards she shrank from discussion of the too allusive topic, but he seemed incapable of resisting its allurements.

"I suppose it is so," he said, after a long silence, as they drove home. "Laws *are* made for man after all, and not man for laws. Man was there before the law, anyway."

She did not mention the loathed name of another man who justified all he chose to do by the same plea. . . .

"Take Patricia in this very play," he continued. "What, after all, was she getting out of her marriage? She'd only one life to live, and what was it with that fellow? Life's too precious stuff to waste in mere discipline."

That in effect, and without intending it, he was making her life 'mere discipline' did not appear to cross his mind. She saw that she had so shaken to the centre his lifelong convictions that for the first time even their stale opposites came to him with a freshness. . . .

"And so," he went on, "they talked it over, naturally, quietly, without bitterness or recriminations, and each went his way. . . . It's difficult to see what else they could have done."

"I thought it was very well acted," Berice murmured. No convictions now came so freshly to her as the very

principles he seemed, so late in the day, to be calling into question.

"Oh, the acting was good enough. . . . But it was an interesting play. . . . You don't appear to have an opinion on it," he said suddenly.

Berice had no choice but to produce one.

"I can't help thinking," she said with embarrassment, "that the scales were loaded just a little."

"In Patricia's favour, you mean?"

"Yes. She was made to appear a little—exceptional——"

"Well?" He paused invitingly. . . .

"—and rather—it's difficult to put—rather *asserted* to be so. I don't know. . . . In that part where she speaks of living her own life—it seemed a silly sort of life, anyway—not very important, I mean. . . . It's—it's difficult. . . . I only feel sure that in nine hundred and ninety-nine cases out of a thousand the rule wouldn't apply."

"No? . . . But what about the odd sheep that's lost in the wilderness?" he inquired, with precisely what degree of ironical comment she could not tell.

She made no reply. It was not for her to invite a "H'm! This from *you!*" by advancing the proposition that this world is of supreme importance as long as we are in it, with the corollary, whether it is not usually those who have proved themselves incapable of its difficulties who vaunt their special information as to the next. . . . Again that was all; but she saw her own prophecy fulfilling itself with fatal speed. That dead, and therefore unkillable man was grinning up from the grave, and Harry was squirming under his grinning. A "H'm!" or a "Well?" might be his only comment when he had extracted a diffident opinion from her, but packed into that "H'm!" or that "Well?" to be produced from the loaded pilule as a conjurer might produce the death's-head flag that sweeps out over half the stage, she saw what he saw—not merely the clouding of present, but the falsification of all past joys, the annihilation of all happiness to come. Present, prospect, retrospect, the canker ate into all; and though he contented himself with a "Well?" or a "H'm!" now he would probably say more by and by. . . .

And yet, poor devil, he struggled. A worse man would not have been so mangled. The protagonists of the play of which they had spoken could be sweetly reasonable, for, as Berice had said, nowhere in the play did their capacity for suffering go beyond bare assertion. They were fearless, broad-minded people, those of the play. If in their breadth, like an overtopped February dyke, they did spread away so thin that only fragmentary reflections of Heaven showed among the soaked grass and weeds, still they undeniably covered a deal of ground. . . . They were fire-clear spirits, they of the play : not like those others—

That bawl for freedom in their senseless mood,
And still revolt when Truth would set them free,

but eaglets of the newer morn, phoenixes rather, each nesting in the lofty eyrie of his own exceptionalness. Philosophy's robes they wore, not as they whose hands had "ycarve that cloth by violence," each bearing away such morsel as he could seize, but as in contemptuous compassion of the less blessed who, that they should be gay and immune, still went in the hodden grey of obedience and responsibility. . . . Pay? They pay? . . . They would have laughed! They paid nothing. Instead they were paid for, and a very small general levy on the public trust and confidence sufficed to keep them in comfort. . . . But Harry was not broad-minded. He was no eaglet. He had no divine philosophy. He was merely born to suffer, and to miss suffering's last costly jewel, the capacity to turn even suffering to beauty. . . .

Nor had he discovered, as she was beginning to discover, that the head may bow to the storm and yet be erect after it has passed. He stood it out stiffly as an oak, and was wrenched to the roots by each blast. And, seeing her calm, he marvelled that apparently she should be less sensitive than he. . . . He thought she did not greatly care, and that having dropped that huge rock into the middle of their lives, she was watching with equanimity while he broke his heart in trying to remove it.

XXIV

PERHAPS Berice had hoped for too much when she had contemplated the asking of a single boon from her husband—that she might be allowed to ease her heart of its load on Mollie Enright's breast. He refused.

“I don't see what good purpose it would serve,” he objected, “and it seems to me that——”

The shrug with which he completed the sentence said plainly enough, “It seems to me that for a secret it's quite sufficiently widely known already; please consider *me* a little now. . . .”

She accepted the refusal meekly. He had an incontestable right to make it, was perhaps even prudent to make it; but when he had made it he stood irresolutely for some moments in a way that gave her a passing hope that he was reconsidering the forbiddance. But he was not. He was merely pursuing a train of thought that the mention of Mrs. Enright's name had started. He knew very little of her except that she was a widow and engaged to Neill. . . .

“There's another thing I've wanted for some time to mention,” he said presently. “Perhaps it isn't exactly cheerful, but it's wise to be prepared. It is this: that in the event of anything happening to me I leave a good deal in your hands. I've made my dispositions, and so I mention this quite informally. There are my collections, for instance. I should like them to be kept together. Whether they remain in your hands or become a public trust I've left entirely to you; the few conditions I make you'll find in my will. There's also a son of a cousin of my mother's whom I've only seen once; he seemed an honest sort of chap, and I shall probably make some sort of a minor bequest to him. But there's

nobody else I need consider, I think. The rest I leave in your charge."

Melancholy anticipations were not particularly good either for his health or his spirits, and she begged him to set such thoughts aside; but he seemed to find a dismal comfort in them.

"These things have to be faced," he said. "And you may as well know now, for instance, that I put no obstacles in your way if you should think fit to marry again."

Again she sought to turn him. "Oh, Harry, as if it was not just as likely that *you'd* have to face that contingency as that I should!——"

He stared at her for a moment; then: "I? . . . Oh, no!" he said. It could be taken in either of two ways—that he did not think he would survive her, or that if he did he had had enough of marriage. . . . She gave it the first interpretation, and ridiculed it gently.

"What fancies, Harry! As if, when your work's done and you've been away for a rest, you won't be as strong as ever you were!"

But he shook his head. "No, it will be for you that that question will crop up, not for me. Of course, I don't advise you one way or the other. I know you won't decide without thinking it carefully over."

In this lurked a sting that she could not with decency entirely disregard. He had advised her in effect to think well before she saddled another man with the burden she had laid upon him.

"Dear," she said quietly, looking fixedly at him, "when people's eyes have been opened they don't make the same mistake twice."

But it was almost as if he sought an occasion for difference. "The mistake of marrying?" he asked.

"Of marrying as I—as I unhappily did. I should never do that again."

"Well, well. . . ." In the gesture of his hand was an indifference, as if he said that since when that day came he would be out of the way the question had no great importance for him. . . .

Then she made a quick little appeal. "Oh, Harry *must* you do this? Is there *no* other way? *Must* you harp always on a thing that's past remedy now? If you must, there's only one thing for me to do——"

He thought he understood what that thing was. "Don't be ridiculous, Berice," he said. "You talked like that before," he added impatiently.

"Like that? . . . Oh, you mistake me. I don't mean your revolver. That's all past. No: the only thing for me to do is to—to bear it."

He made a little peevish movement. "Come, come, Berice," he said, "let's take this like sensible people. We've got it to bear between us. Things will adjust themselves in a bit, I've no doubt, but you can't expect them to do so all at once. I'm trying to deal justly, you know."

She could not say that he was dealing unjustly, nor was there a deal to be said for the kind of justice he meted out to her. She could only make no claim whatever. Defenceless she stood before him, for him to wound if he must.

But suddenly again she changed. Her bosom began to rise and fall agitatedly. She broke out in a low and unsteady voice.

"It would have been kinder—it would have been kinder—if you'd done this at first—that morning. I could have made you all the reparation in my power at once then. . . . But you wouldn't allow me. You took that away from me. 'And now—and now—I'm not to be killed mercifully, but by inches. . . . Oh, Harry, don't you see what you're rooting up, the very instant it's born? You have such a love now, if you'll take it, as you never, never had before—you asked for that chance, you know—we didn't know how it would come about, but it has come about—if only, if *only* you'll take it! *Must* it die, Harry? . . .'" She flung out her arms.

Again compunction shot him through, and he knew not what to say. "Dearest——" he began; but suddenly she sank to the ground, lacing her arms about his knees and turning up to him an aching, dreadfully wistful face.

"Harry, Harry!" she cried. "It's not me I want you to think of—don't think of me—but spare, oh, spare yourself!"

I only want to see *you* at peace! Yourself, yourself, Harry! Then, if you've a crumb of comfort left over you can give it to me! . . . Oh, love, was that other so much? So much, when I tell you that until this came I didn't know what love was? That's all yours, Harry—all, all yours! . . . And what *was* that old thing? So silly, so *meaningless*! Oh, what hope is there for any of us if a thing like that, that never had any real life, is to live on for ever? Don't you see, husband mine, what a precious, oh, a precious thing has come out of it? Don't you see that that precious thing's yours? Don't you see that without that other you'd never have had it? Oh, don't kill it, Harry, don't kill it!—”

His hands were moving in her hair, but his brow was twisted with pain.

“If only—if only——” he groaned, but he could not speak it. Again her cry rang out.

“Oh, can a thing that's so *little* now to me be so much to you? Isn't your love strong enough to bear it? Wouldn't you marry me again, knowing all? *Wouldn't* you?——”

As he looked down on her through his tears his heart vowed that he would. . . .

“*Wouldn't* you, Harry? Not even as Murragh Neill can marry Mollie Enright? *Wouldn't* you?——”

He had freed his knees from her embrace and was walking about the room, no longer making any attempt to conceal his hideous suffering. And again it was an anguish to him that he was bolted and riveted to himself—could not change his skin—must suffer according to the law of his being—could not take it as those others would have taken it, the philosophic, broad-minded, clear-eyed rejoicers in a life the cost of which they escaped. Recently he had envied these; now he hated them again. He hated them for their irresponsibility, their lightheartedness, their luck. What was it all to *them*? One mistress up, t'other down—it was all the same to *them*! . . . And the mockery they made of the real things! It embittered him again beyond bearing that they should preach their lax charity and justify themselves in their blasphemy of the sweet name of mercy. For it was a^r blasphemy—the only blasphemy. It was not this man nor that woman they

wronged, but Right itself. They quenched the inner light of all. Any poor devil wavering between desire and duty, torn, in peril, but not past hope of safety, had but to go to them, and *they* would find him reasons enough why, instead of bracing himself, he should close his eyes and allow all to slip from him! *They* could filch fire from Heaven, and no beak was plunged into *their* vitals as they expired continually chained to their rock! Incapable of putting two and two together on earth, they nevertheless attempted the gigantic equations of Heaven, and decked all with a false divinity. "To know all is to forgive all"—ah, it came well from *them*! "Judge not"—no, for a tremendous reason! "Let him that is without sin among you"—what, did men no longer fall on their faces before their God, but instead made terms and compositions and bargains with Him, refrained from throwing on the condition they were not thrown at, giving Him a cheap advertisement on earth to be redeemed in the genuine stock hereafter? . . . No, *they* did not suffer, Harrison Emney's heart cried bitterly. *They* did not steal from the general capital sum, but merely drew on it a little in advance—hardly a speculation when you considered the dazzling profits almost certain to come of the merely technical irregularity! . . . And if every thief who dipped his fingers into the till could point out the convenience of having money, well, there are thieves and thieves, and one must always be careful that the exceptional thief is not wronged! . . .

Ah, if Emney could only have taken it all broad-mindedly, and pocketed such profits as there were! . . .

He had stopped before Berice again. She still knelt. Suddenly he sank on his knees at her side, passed his arms about her, and drew her close to him.

"Bear with me, darling," he gulped. "Yes, I know you have given me all—all that I could never have had without this. The way it's come about has rather shaken me, though. . . . But bear with me. I'm no hero. I really thought that morning that I could carry it; it didn't seem beyond my strength then; and if the distance tells, I shall grow stronger too, I dare say. I shall get used to it by and by; I'll try; I will. I do love you. I'll try. When these bad

times come I won't let you see me ; I'll lock myself up ; I'll send you away. I'll try—I will try. Will you forgive me, and kiss me ? . . .”

They kissed as they knelt. Presently they rose again, almost happy. . . .

For a week it was as if they were newly-married again. . . .

His idea, that a serviceable end might be served if at times they saw less of one another, led her to accept, at his urging, an invitation to spend a few days with Mollie Enright, who, with Neill and Bunny, was staying with an aunt in Surrey. Berice no longer feared the prospect of meeting Bunny, and, as Harry had to be away for a couple of days, they travelled together as far as Guildford. There they parted, he promising to write and tell her when he himself should return.

To find herself with Mollie Enright again was a blessed interlude for Berice. Kind finds kind more or less surely in this imperfect world, and there seek us out with the years brothers and sisters not ours by accident of birth. Out of the common source of experience from which we all alike drink we become related ; and out of that fount a close sistership was established between Berice and Mollie. It came of itself ; they knew nothing of its coming until it was there. There were no confidences, no little explicit confessions between them ; nor, since the wild mood had passed in which Berice had dreaded men, did it matter that she was thrown now into Neill's company, now into Bunny's, alone.

Bunny, in fact, no longer avoided her ; and it was not a difficult guess that Mollie had privately ordered him to be nice to Berice and had given him a talking-to. Berice remembered her certainty that he had taken Mollie into his confidence, and for the rest, now that it no longer mattered, she thought that Bunny had greatly improved in that lesson of life which consists in taking things as they are. They were able to talk without embarrassment, and, if a rock was set down in the middle of their lives also, they must adapt themselves to its presence or forswear each other's company entirely.

One remark, and one only that glanced at the past, did Bunny make during Berice's stay. The four of them had

taken a long walk, and Mollie and Neill had dropped out of sight over the brow of a road that ran between deep sandy banks. Bunny had been speaking of certain Imperial celebrations that had been held the year before, and, as Bunny had the "colour-sense" very strongly, he had growled almost in his old style that certain natives had been brought over for no better purposes than those of pomp and display and empty advertisement of the Empire.

"And our hold on India depending so largely on the respect in which white women are held!—" he had growled. "Revolting! I saw 'em at Hampton Court; a couple of hundred yards of 'em there were, swarming about the enclosure ropes, these fellows on one side and quite decent middling-sort English girls on the other! All over 'em they were; revolting!—"

"I suppose they went merely out of curiosity," Berice had suggested. "It was a spectacle."

"Spectacle! . . . A pretty sort of spectacle half-breeds are! . . . And all to make a holiday! . . . Well, I suppose it's no more than we do over there. . . ."

"How, we do over there?"

"Their women," said Bunny curtly. . . .

"Do you mean—do you mean that Englishmen out there . . . ?"

"I mean that some of 'em—officers too . . . but it's pretty distasteful: let's drop it."

He left it at that; but it did not remain at that in Berice's thoughts. That Bunny had spoken of the matter at all seemed to argue a particularity, an instance, perhaps. . . . For one moment she was conscious of a slight nausea; she thought of Celia Chester . . . but the next minute she was herself and walking forward again. After all, it didn't matter; that in her which had experienced a momentary twinge was so old, so old and far away. Her dissociation from it was almost complete, and to her hand, ready for taking, lay the last forgiveness of all—her own. Bunny, she knew, knew hosts of men in India . . . but it didn't matter, now. . . .

And though they dropped the subject, he had been quite specific enough. . . .

Berice would have given a good deal had Bunny not been acting quite so obviously under orders. She was very curious to know how he himself stood affected towards her. She had not had twenty consecutive words with him since that day when, realizing that he knew, she had refused to let him see that she knew; and gladly, had it been possible, she would have withdrawn that refusal now. But it was not possible. The withdrawal might have involved Harry, who had forbidden her to involve him further. She must take that also on her shoulders—the weight of her concealment. She wondered what, exactly, had taken place between Bunny and Mollie, and found herself making guesses. . . . Bunny had loved her; possibly still loved her; no doubt he had told Mollie Enright so; and naturally Mollie must have asked certain questions. In that case Bunny's replies to her "Did you ever ask her? . . . Why didn't you ask her?" must have left many things unexplained. What guesses had Mollie been making in her own heart? . . .

Never, never had she longed as ardently that all might be hidden as she now yearned to tell Mollie all!

But to Mollie also she must remain spuriously magnificent. . . .

That walk with Bunny had been rather injudiciously long; it had made her back ache and set her head throbbing; and the next morning she did not appear at breakfast. Her absence brought Mollie up to her room; she found her sitting on the edge of her bed, her dressing arrested half-way. A quick look between the two women sufficed. . . . Mollie herself undressed her again and put her back into bed, and, when she had had her own breakfast, came up again to sit with her. Presently their two heads were on one pillow, Mollie lying down dressed by her side. . . . Her first marriage had given her no children. . . .

"But you will have, dear," Berice murmured in her ear. . . .

Mollie laughed softly.

"That's as it may be. Of course, one wishes . . . but my heart wouldn't be broken so long as I had Murragh. . . ."

"But—before? . . ."

“ Ah, before ! . . . ”

Their talk became secret.

“ But, dear,” Mollie said presently, “ ought you to be thinking of travelling a few weeks from now ? ” Berice had told Mollie that Harry intended to get away as soon as the ‘ reconstruction ’ was completed.

“ We shall go quite comfortably.”

“ But—a couple of days in the train ?——”

“ I shall be all right. It will do me less harm than it would to stay behind.”

“ You model wife !——” Mollie commented.

“ Not at all,” said Berice. . . . “ But go and join your own man. Don’t waste your day here.”

“ Oh, they’re off together somewhere or other, the pair of them.” And then, giving Berice a look that was half shy and half mischievous, she asked, “ How do you find Bunny ? ”

Berice coloured faintly, and smiled. “ I find him as if—as if you’d been talking to him,” she said.

Mollie twinkled. “ Do you ? . . . Most observant, to be sure ! . . . ”

“ Why did you ? ” Berice asked in confusion.

But Mollie turned her off with a light laugh. “ Why ? Well, he came as near turning his back on you as he dared that afternoon at my house a few weeks ago ; he was as cross as a bear with a sore head, and I told him so ; that’s all.”

It was not all ; Berice was sure it was not all ; but it was all that Mollie seemed inclined to say. And a fresh wonder had arisen in Berice. It was whether, supposing the barrier of Harry’s forbiddance had not existed, she had the *right* to obtain a selfish ease for herself at the cost of placing the burden of a secret on her friend. She began to doubt whether she had that right. . . .

She had daily letters from Harry, and the one she received on the following morning made her again a little uneasy. He was no more clever at concealing things in his letters than he was at expressing them, and it seemed to her that the letter had an undercurrent of painful thought. She knew the hundred occasions of smarting that hemmed him round ; a book, a paper, a reminiscence, the sight of a happy couple,

in any of these lay the possibility of barbed surprise; and the letter suggested that during her absence his thoughts were making havoc with him again. . . . She took a sudden decision; it was that she would return on the morrow. Though she could give him no more than that appeasing of his pain that was born of his wreaking himself on her, it was in her to give that, and she felt she must give it. She would return on the morrow. . . .

But as it happened, she was to return earlier than the morrow. The letter had come by the morning's post; at midday there arrived for her a telegram from his doctor. The wording of it was emptily reassuring—everything was quite all right—a slight attack—if she could conveniently return—but absolutely no cause for alarm. . . .

She wired back the single word 'Coming,' and then sought Mollie.

"Very well, dear; perhaps you'd better; I'm sorry," Mollie sighed. "You'll let us know how you find him? . . ."

"I'll let you know," said Berice.

Bunny accompanied her that afternoon to the station. During the greater part of the journey he did not speak. His sympathetic silence, indeed, lasted until he had handed her her ticket and put her into the train; then he mumbled something about coming to see her again before he went back to Brittany—if he did go back—trusting she'd find everything all right—and (this blurted out) again hoping she was happy. He seemed to recognize that his former expression of that hope had been but a perfunctory performance.

Berice gave him a long, serious, affectionate look. Into it she strove to put she did not clearly know what of admission and conciliation and humility.

"It's—all right, Bunny," she said, her eyes holding his. "It's all right—now——" She dared the last word, trembling lest it should be transgressing Harry's orders, but feeling that she owed Bunny something.

She had to trust him to understand. . . . Already the guard was waving his flag.

"You—you're happy, Berice?" Bunny demanded, with a little, eager jump.

“ I—love my husband,” Berice replied, releasing his eyes.

Bunny lifted his cap as the train moved away; then, without looking behind him, he strode out of the station. His eyes were on the ground, and he was frowning. He was wondering whether Berice loved her husband for something he was, or—for something he had done. He couldn't quite understand that ‘ now.’ . . .

“ It's for something he's done,” he muttered to himself. “ I wonder what it was? . . .”

The wonder occupied him as he sauntered idly back along the highroad, head down, hands deep in pockets, and with a quick averting of his eyes, as if he did not wish them to be seen, when somebody passing gave him good day. . .

Two and a half hours later Berice reached home. She found Harry in bed. He had ruptured another vessel, and was momentarily expecting a visit from the doctor. And his querulousness and impatience and sorrow for himself had descended on him again like a heavy cloud.

“ Oh, you've come ! ” was his blunt greeting. . . .

“ My poor love ! ” she murmured, bending over him.

The hope he expressed that she had travelled in comfort was a very perfunctory courtesy. “ I don't suppose you've had any dinner either,” he said fretfully. “ Better leave me and go and get some ; it's no good having two crocks in the house.”

“ I've ordered some ; it will be ready presently.—Poor boy ! ”

“ You look very well,” he said, almost resentfully.

“ Oh, I wish you were !——” she sighed.

The doctor arrived as she was half-way through her meal. She had a few words with him, and then he went up to Harry's room. A quarter of an hour later he sought her again.

“ You must get your husband away without loss of time,” he said. “ In London he'll just die. There's no cause for alarm if you get him away at once, but he must do no work, and must be kept perfectly quiet. Quiet in his mind too, you understand ; I must look to you for that. Is he worried about anything ? ”

Berice said that he was worried . . . she murmured words about the 'reconstruction.' . . .

"He mustn't worry. There's no reason why you should either if you do as I say. Keep him perfectly quiet, and if possible contented. Worry's probably done a good deal to bring this on. Don't let him raise his arms suddenly either. . . . Can you take him at once?"

"The moment you say he's fit to move."

"Very good. And let me see: he'd better have a nurse too; I'll send you one. If he can remain away the whole winter so much the better. He mentioned Algiers; that will do excellently. Keep him quiet and easy in his mind, and promise me you won't worry either. . . ."

That same evening Berice began to prepare for their departure. Luckily she had brought back from her wedding trip a French maid, and to have somebody about who spoke better French than her own would simplify many things. The doctor came again on the following day, and each day. His words, like those of the telegram that had summoned her home, were cast in the form of reassurances, with disquieting meanings behind them. The nurse arrived, a thin, sandy Scotchwoman, and already the French maid was busy booking sleeping-berths and buying necessaries. On a Wednesday morning in September they were ready to start. Midday found them on the departure quay at Dover, and Harry, rugged and shawled and cushioned, was made comfortable on the deck. They reached Paris in time to dine, and then a couple of taxies took them to the Gare de Lyon, for they were passing straight through to Marseilles. They entered the train; it moved out through the network of tramway-like metals; an hour later the sun went down behind the poplars of Sens; in the *wagon-lit* the hood was drawn over the lamp; and Harrison Emney slept badly, attended constantly by his wife, and visited from time to time by the Scotch nurse who came in from the adjoining compartment.

XXV

IT was doubtful whether he clearly realized how ill he was. Had he done so different thoughts would probably have occupied him. As they sped in the darkness southwards through the French provinces he made a fresh demand on Berice every half-hour ; and then, as Berice, with the little portable spirit-lamp which she affixed to the side of the compartment, prepared a cup of broth for him, he changed abruptly and declared that he paid a woman to do that sort of thing and that she had better send for the nurse. But the presence of the nurse would scarcely have lightened Berice's duties ; the Scotchwoman might just as well be allowed to sleep ; and Berice bore his complaining without allowing her own mental and physical distress to be seen.

"Where are we now ?" he asked, for the tenth time at two o'clock in the morning as the train slowed up.

"Autun, I think."

"Not at Lyon yet—what an insufferable night ! . . . If we're stopping you might send that maid of yours to see if there's any fresh milk to be had ; that other stuff's sour."

"We're not stopping," she said, as the train moved forward again ; and he fumed.

"Might as well stop as crawl at this pace ; do they call this a *rapide*, I wonder ?——"

"Drink this, dear, and then try to sleep," she said, giving him the cup of broth.

"Don't spill it all over my hand. . . . And can't you shade that light a little more ? . . ."

Presently he dozed again ; but she, alert to his slightest movement, only closed her eyes to rest them.

Though he did not know how ill he was, she had already

looked full in the face of the worst that could happen. The repeated small hæmorrhages, the empty reassurance of the doctor's words, the care that had been so insisted on, these made it a point of mere prudence to be prepared. And her anxiety was the greater that she knew it to be beyond her power to do what the doctor had told her she must do—guarantee his tranquillity of mind. She now knew less than ever whether, when he closed his eyes at night, he would open them again to respite and peace or to fresh aspects and combinations of the horror that plagued him. She had no power of direction over his moods. At a word, at a look, he was off. And occasionally it was she herself who all unwittingly set him off. She could not speak, in any connection whatever, of gentleness and forgiveness but he was reminded of the innumerable times when she herself must have stood in need of gentleness and forgiveness ; a remark dropped in a mood more practical and braced equally brought up the whole dreary thing ; and if she did not speak at all he was as likely as not to interpret her silence as indifference. And he fed horribly on his own thoughts—but no : they fed on him. It was not a rock that had been dropped into the garden of their lives ; it was rather some malignant, hideous growth, that put out suckers and feelers and fastened on all that came within its reach. The ordinary rubs of life invade a man as it were from the circumference of him, and rarely have power to carry his central stronghold by assault ; but this enemy reduced the citadel, like a plague, from within. It drove the defenders forth, scattered them, and destroyed them in detail. He had been anxiously preoccupied to be strict and just ; an excess of strictness and an intolerable justice had now become his monomania. . . .

Yet there are hours in which even the Devil no longer has power over the damned, and it was in those hours that, watching her chance, she could still soothe and console him. In those hours he acknowledged, with freely-flowing tears, that she had left nothing unattempted, had refused no meek and dignified submission. In those hours he reproached none but himself, sought to fix his mind on past errors of his own, begged for her patience and pardon, and she could only

murmur over him and caress his head within her arms until, exhausted, he slept.

And probably the next morning his eyes would open again, not on those fair meads of thousand-flowering charities, but on the grim, red-lighted apparatus of the torture-chamber again.

It was not, however, on the corded and pulleyed rack, but on the smaller supplementary devices of deviltry, that he opened them as the day overtook them in the region of the Puy-de-Dôme. He had slept through the short stop at Lyon. Berice had softly raised the blinds that she might look out on the broad Rhône and away to the sea of craters of the giant range. She had not known that he was awake; the first she knew of it was that he made a totally unexpected remark—a remark on Mollie Enright.

“You seem to be getting pretty intimate with her,” he said. “I hope you’re observing a certain wish of mine.”

“I am, dear,” she replied, bending over him. “Am I not to have a good morning kiss?”

He accepted her kiss barely with patience, and presently spoke again.

“Oh! That’s all right, then. I was afraid you might have forgotten something.”

“I’ve forgotten nothing, Harry,” she said quietly, stopping for a moment in the ordering of her hair before a travelling mirror.

“So much the better. I merely mention this so that there shall be no mistake. I’ll not have my reputation put in peril for the sake of any false delicacy.”

“I shall not forget, Harry.”

“Very good. I’m not saying you do forget. But don’t talk as if the thing was impossible, that’s all. You’ve had me laughed at once—since we were married too——”

The unhappy man fought with himself even in saying the words, but the hooks were in his flesh again. She knew what he meant had happened since their marriage: he meant Bartholomew. . . . It was a delectable variation from the major torment. . . .

He had known that sooner or later it would come, that

hour in which the thing itself would appear less than that the thing should be known—and here it was, punctual to its appointment. His reputation, his reputation. . . . It was for his reputation that he groaned. . . . Ah, how dearly he had prized that—and somewhere in the world a man went his way chuckling at him! . . . ‘A man?’ Nay, more than one! Several men—in his self-flagellation he made nothing of it that he lumped Neill, Bunny, a writer of poisonous poems, and a renegade off to Canada together—several men laughed in their sleeve at him! He ground his teeth. Ah, if the thing might but come back on them! . . . “What, such a fuss over such a trifle?” said the eaglets, the philosophic, the broad-minded ones of the novels and plays. Ah, if but the boot were on the other leg—if some of their philosophy and breadth of mind could but be brought home to their own doors! It would soon be seen who was the possessor and the tyrant then! Others’ griefs are easily borne—Emney, grinding his teeth, wanted to smile at the smilers for a change! . . . In the meantime he would take very good care that that select band of smilers was not added to! Add a woman to that lot? Let her attempt it! . . . She had not, in fact, attempted it, but that made no difference: let her attempt it! . . .

But she did not know his thoughts. She was speaking to him as he lay there, beside himself with rage. She was asking whether she should not make his chocolate.

“No!” he cried. Then, by a violent effort mitigating the sharpness of the tone, “No; I don’t want any; please don’t talk; I want to be let alone,” he added.

But, wearily, she had now seen. She had begun to know it by heart.

“Don’t think, dear,” she begged him. “Give your mind a rest, and let me make your chocolate.”

“No. I can wait till Miss Burn is up. Let her earn her money.—Has Mrs. Enright—I don’t mean have you said anything to her, but has she tried to get anything out of you?”

“No,” Berice replied, wincing at the wound so savagely given to her friend.

“What do you think—think *she* thinks, I mean?”

“Dear, dear—I don’t think anything,” Berice moaned.

“What do you mean by that? That *you* haven’t thought about it, or that you think *she* doesn’t think anything?”

But suddenly her brows went sharply upwards as she saw him still teasing the nerve.

“Harry,” she cried sharply, “put it out of your mind! It’s dangerous, dangerous! You’re to have perfect rest, and how can you if you let these things have their way with you like this?”

“Eh? . . . Yes, I suppose the doctor did say that. . . . But I don’t know that it matters very much. I’m as well out of the way. I’m only cumbering the ground. . . . Who else was there at that place besides you and Mrs. Enright?”

“Harry!—” she implored.

“Neill and Hartopp, I suppose?”

“Only those, and Mrs. Enright’s aunt——”

“H’m! Hartopp, of course. Of course, *he’d* be there. I’ve very little doubt that——”

But if he was about to say anything about Bunny the entrance of the Scotch nurse prevented it. Miss Burn performed her morning duties, and then began to make chocolate and to take rolls and butter and cold viands from the basket. Berice stepped out into the corridor. The high terraced vineyards of Montélimar were flying past, terrace on terrace, their haze pierced through with the morning sun. Behind her, beyond where Miss Burn was making preparations for breakfast, the Rhône rolled turbidly through the high forests of the Ardèche. The olives and almonds were already beginning to dispute the possession of the golden land with the vines; by and by oranges would supplant the dust-grey olives; exhilaratingly the *rapide* rushed down the noble valley; but Berice saw nothing. She wept, quietly, without restraint, so that the tears ran down her face as a rain-storm runs down a pane. It was not for herself, not for him, that she was weeping now. She and he were past weeping for now. She was weeping for that new, budding, tender thing, now killed, that she had hoped might have come of his magnanimity and her own faithfulness. . . .

Yes, it was killed. The burden had been too much, not for his willingness, but for his strength, and their marital hopes lay in ruins about them. The thing had a fatal perfection. What the main fact spared the derivatory ones seized upon, and no duty nor service could now stay the ravage. Each morrow, for as many morrows as there might be, would but repeat to-day. Love and trust were dead. For him, at least, she had killed them. . . .

She glanced over her shoulder into the carriage. He was talking to the nurse now. He seemed to have taken to her for her Scottish appearance and her northern accent, and they were talking about Dumfries and Kirkcudbrightshire; she heard them as the terraced vineyards sped, all blurred and drowned, past her eyes. They knew, the nurse and Harry, places, and even people, in common; the Scotchwoman even knew by name this son of Emney's mother's cousin for whom Harry intended to make some provision in his will; he was in a shipping office in Glasgow, if the nurse remembered rightly; Robertson his name was; and his father had been one of those Robertsons of Lanark, not the new Robertsons, whose boys all did so well as doctors and in the Church, but the old lot . . . old Donald's lot. . . .

And there unfolded again before Berice's eyes Harry's whole story—his mother's sacrifice that he might enter the bank, her death when his rise "had no longer mattered," his steady climb, his Calvinistic morality. . . . He had never lost the faith that there was, just above him, ever just above him, something not relatively, but absolutely good, strong, worth striving for, something with an essential merit the desire for which differentiates the ambitious from the snob. . . . He had kept this faith, this credulity perhaps, sweet and wholesome; that 'cleverest thing he had ever done,' his refusal to allow business entirely to engross him, had been part of the same aspiration; and Berice did not doubt what a bright and shining thing his marriage one day must ever have been in his dreams. And he had married, and—this was the end of it all! . . . She saw it. She saw that he saw it too, for his chattering to the nurse was nothing more than his babbling of green fields. He was re-living as he talked

with her the days when he had still had fair illusions, the days before the baubles, seized one by one, had turned to tinsel-dust in his grasp. Probably he was now wondering why he had not been content to remain where he was. . . .

And from the recapitulation of his story she passed to her own. So wide a ruin, to have come from an hour or two's egregious liberty! So complete an unfulfilment in answer to her confident demands! . . . But she had not the heart to retrace it all step by step; instead she merely extended its scope a little. Knowledge of one heart is knowledge of most others; degrees and proportions vary, but the humanity remains much the same; and, knowing herself now, how many, many others did she not know!

For she saw clearly enough now that she had been only one of countless exceptions who, well warned beforehand, must still needs go through the deeps of suffering and the shallows of hopelessness merely to discover that they were not exceptional after all. Exceptional? She almost smiled. . . . No, she and her kind were not exceptional. Exceptions were made of harder stuff. So rare a bird was the exception, at such wide intervals did he visit the earth, that his practical relation to the Life we all live was not a matter of great importance to the rest of us. A very little of him went a very, very long way. True, there might be no ignoring him when he did come; destructive, devastating he was, bowing his back to the pillars of temples and perishing himself in the havoc he wrought; he came with a terrible shout, and had a voice to shout with too. He did not creep round and destroy from behind; his warning was thunder. When all was said, there is nothing conceivable to be thought, how ranging beyond bounds whatsoever, but some exception affirms or has affirmed it, vouching for it with his perilous soul; but that was no concern of the weighty average of men.

But these others! The infinitesimal destroyers! The nibblers, the burrowers, the crawlers about foundations! . . . Much ease, little glory, in such destruction as that! They did not so much as envisage the thing they sought to bring to nothing. They did not know that man makes no mightier thing than his Law. Law to them was license to do each as

it pleased him in his own little hole. No rumours of majesties and splendours penetrated to where they mined. . . . And if they, even they, did feel the need of a rule and an admonition, and took it upon themselves to warn, their very forbiddances were half-sanctions and their warnings almost invitations. By both heightened affirmations and total exclusions, they falsified Life. Cleopatras—or at the least Carmens—grew on every bush for them, Messalinas were three a penny, and if not the magnificence, at least the sordidness was within reach of all. . . . And—though Berice's apprehension of this was hardly more definite than the sight of the rushing landscape before her eyes—their novels and plays! These so disregarded the great average of Life's likelihood that in the result nothing was propounded save the highly probable exceptionalness of everybody who breathed. To the lamps of this art the nocturnal things blundered like buzzards in a deep twilight. That the rebelling heroine might run her go-as-you-please, the whole ordered handicap was to be disorganized; that she might be invested with an impossible rightness, others, neither exceptionally stupid nor exceptional in that they considered themselves above the law, were asked to put themselves in the wrong. "Live and let live" was the cry, and the nobler cry, "Live and help to live," was forgotten. . . .

And when they did obey, these nibblers and borers, it was with a contemptuous acquiescence the merit of which did not extend beyond themselves. They urged others to a course for which they themselves lacked the courage, and the question still remained whether even disobedience, committed with a sense of the divinity of the bidding, was not a better thing than a merely technical concurrence that denied that divinity. There are—if a strain may be put upon sacred words—two ways of looking at the parable, "Sir, I go. . . ." And the shining words of their banners again! . . . It was as if they had just heard of the charities and mercies that others had never forgotten. . . .

And did they think, when all was done, that they were doing anything more than setting up in the place of a tried and easy and tolerable convention one that was untried and

intolerable? Did they think that laws could *ever* be made in the interests of the breakers, rather than in those of the observers of them? Their newness, their super-divinity! . . . Then Berice's thoughts took a swift and sickening leap. If these things were so, any unexceptional man would be able to say to any blessedly ordinary woman, as had been said to herself: "*Come away from this damned frigid England—come away to a place where men and women can love as they were meant to love!*" It might, supposing her own child should prove to be a little girl, happen that . . .

Oh, how the burrowers and inglorious destroyers, like the man who had uttered those words, must hate England! They accepted from England all that England would give them—a trust too foolish, a protection too generous, an honour they had never earned—and how they hated her! Suppose England, one day opening her eyes, should in return see them for what they were? Suppose England . . .

"I beg pardon, Mrs. Emney——"

It was the nurse, passing out of the carriage with a basin in her hand. "Breakfast is ready, Mrs. Emney," she said. . .

The tears had dried on Berice's face, and her weeping had eased her heart. She re-entered the carriage, sought her dressing-case, bathed her eyes without attracting Harry's attention, and then sat down to preside at the basket. . . . They had left Orange before the repast was finished.

Orange, Avignon, Tarascon. . . . Marie, the maid, a little Parisienne, had come in, and was ecstatic at seeing so much of her own country. At Arles she descended to send a telegram announcing their approach, and then, climbing into the *voiture* again, looked with eyes that shone like the shining *étangs* for the first glimpse of the Mediterranean. It came, a wedge of blue that was immediately shut off again as the train plunged into a tunnel. . . . When next they saw it it was over the sheds and sidings and goods yards of Marseilles.

Of the party, Marie the maid alone possessed much French that was not academic, and to her had been left all arrangements for the two days they were to spend in Marseilles before taking the company's boat. She had reserved their

rooms from Paris ; she now secured a couple of *fiacres*, and, seated in the second one with the Scotch nurse, was consulting a business directory, pp. "*Médécins et pharmaciens.*" Berice had preferred not to undertake the sea voyage without a previous consultation. . . .

It was as they drew near their hotel, one that looked down the Cannebière, that Berice turned her head quickly towards a *voiture* that passed them. Harry saw her turn.

"Somebody you know?" he asked.

"I'm not sure," Berice replied. "It looked awfully like Mrs. Finch-Ommaney and Celia Chester. Did you see them?"

"I shouldn't know them if I did."

"Of course. You never met them. I forgot."

But the mere mention of the detested name sufficed to set him off into a fit of brooding that lasted until they reached the hotel.

It was indeed Mrs. Finch-Ommaney, accompanied by Celia ; Berice encountered them that same afternoon on the stairs of the hotel. Celia ran to her with a little cry and kissed her warmly, but Mrs. Finch-Ommaney's lips shaped uncordial endearments and barely touched Berice's brow. After exclamations of astonishment Celia told Berice that she and Mrs. Finch-Ommaney were on their way to Egypt.

"And you, Berice dear?" said Mrs. Finch-Ommaney, looking nonchalantly elsewhere.

"To Algiers. I have my husband with me. He's ordered to winter abroad."

"What a pity we can't all go together!" said Mrs. Finch-Ommaney, with no insupportable regret in her tone. "We were to have left yesterday, but I wanted to see the port my boy sailed from," she continued fluently, in a rather high tone. "We drove down to the Quai this morning. An Indian boat was just starting, and I'd taken a map. They pass Corsica, and go through the Straits of Messina. We go by Malta and Alexandria. It was wonderful."

She did not say what was wonderful ; perhaps she meant it was wonderful that her living feet should be treading the same ground that his dead ones had trodden. A year had

brought her sorrow to the perfection of sickly mellowness ; she now idolized it completely ; and Berice wondered whether Celia had been with her all the time.

She learned, that same evening, that she had not. Berice and Harry had dined in their own room, but after dinner Harry had dozed, and Berice had wandered down into the dining-room. There she met Celia. The two women found a palm-sheltered corner at the turn of the stairs. They talked. . .

“ No,” Celia said, in answer to Berice’s question. “ I left soon after your marriage—within a month, anyway.—And oh, my dear, the oddest chance ! A man turned up—it was actually on the evening of your wedding day—who was taking a walking tour round the Dales, and he’d happened to see poor Lal’s portrait in the church, and—would you believe it ?—he’d known him in India !——”

Berice shivered slightly. “ Been in his regiment, perhaps,” she said presently.

“ No,” said Celia ; “ at least he didn’t say so ; he’d just met him somewhere or other, I suppose ; Murchison, I think he said his name was. Mrs. Finch-Ommaney would have asked him to stay, I fancy, but unfortunately he had to leave that very night. I left them together to have a talk, and I rather fancy—I don’t know, of course ”—Celia dropped her voice—“ that he borrowed some money of her. But wasn’t it odd ? ”

It was, perhaps, not so odd as it seemed to Celia, and Berice felt for a moment a stirring of now dusty memories . . . but there ; it didn’t matter ; the poor devil was in Canada by this time, starting afresh. . . .

“ And how is—she ? ” Berice asked by and by ; and Celia pursed her lips.

“ Oh, I don’t know. I can’t make her out. Until a fortnight ago I’ve not seen very much of her, you see. . . . I say, Berice,” she suddenly asked in a puzzled voice, “ is there really anything *in* these things—mediums and clairvoyants and all that ? I mean, is it just guessing, or do they really *know* anything ?——”

“ Ah ! . . . It’s come to that, has it ? . . . ”

“ I don’t quite know,” Celia replied, “ but she saw some

of these people in London, and—and I think it's rather—rather black-velvety, from what she said. . . .”

Berice sighed. It did not, however, surprise her that to the other accessories of grief Mrs. Finch-Ommaney had added the devices of the thaumaturgist.

“Yes,” she said absently, “I thought it would end in that. She hates me,” she added.

“Berice!” murmured Celia with reproach, but also with embarrassment. . . . “She found you a little unsympathetic, perhaps, that's all. But,” Celia became more embarrassed still, “she *did* say—I hope you won't be hurt, dear—I think it's very stupid of her, and please don't mind—she *did* say that she'd rather not meet your husband. . . . He won't think it very odd, will he? The time's so short, you see—we leave to-morrow—you can make some excuse——”

“I think,” said Berice slowly, “that you may make my husband's compliments, and his apologies that he's not well enough to see her before she goes.—All right, Marie, I'll come in a moment——”

The maid had come to fetch Berice away. She said good night to Celia, and left her. . . .

It did not please Harry that Berice had taken it upon herself to make his excuses to Mrs. Finch-Ommaney, and he made his displeasure felt. He would very much have liked to meet Mrs. Finch-Ommaney, he said. . . . Berice urged that the time was so short. . . . It was a discourtesy to a Cotterdale neighbour, he grumbled. . . . She could not tell him that Mrs. Finch-Ommaney did not wish to meet him. . . . He passed to anger—it had been a very special desire of his, he cried, to meet Mrs. Finch-Ommaney . . . and there was, on his part at least, a scene. It left him, at the end of a quarter of an hour, breathless and spent; when she thought it was all over he broke out again more violently; and she grew alarmed.

“*Harry!*” she cried sharply. “Don't be so violent! A trifle like that is nothing compared with——”

But her cry had come too late. His head had fallen back, and his hand fumbled pitifully for the handkerchief under his pillow. His mouth protruded, the veins of his neck and

temples were swelled. Hurriedly she gave him the handkerchief. . . .

When he dropped it a minute later it was again marbled with the telltale red.

She looked distractedly round for a bell, and then ran to the door and called. Marie was bidden to fly for a doctor at once. She returned with one in a quarter of an hour. Marie formed one of their consultation perforce, and she translated to Berice the doctor's words. . . . It was necessary, yes, but necessary absolutely, that Monsieur should remain tranquil—*aucun mouvement*—my God, yes! It was of a gravity. . . . Madame spoke of sailing? There was nothing, it was necessary to understand, nothing so impossible in the world. It was the invitation to death. Monsieur must not sail. Monsieur must have a *garde-malade*; Madame, that could be seen, was herself broken with fatigue; a *garde-malade* should be sent that moment—*même*. . . .

“Tell him we have one,” said Berice dully.

Ah, so much the better, the doctor continued. Madame also must rest—the necessity announced itself. The doctor would call again in the morning—he would prefer to be allowed to bring a *confrère*—Madame would pardon him that he insisted on this——

Marie interpreted the doctor's instructions to Miss Burn, who had entered; the doctor trusted all would be well, and would call again in the morning accompanied by a very distinguished *confrère*. . . . He left, and Berice helped Miss Burn to pack Harry's pillows, and then retired with a heavy heart to her own room. She was indeed broken with fatigue. She went to bed, and slept immediately the sleep of the dead.

She was in Harry's room betimes in the morning. He had hardly moved. He whispered something in which she distinguished the words “Sudden . . . manager . . . apologize,” and she gathered that he wished her to explain his state to the manager of the hotel and to apologize for the trouble he was giving. She kissed his forehead, and then left him in order to do so.

In the vestibule she met the manager; he was escorting

Mrs. Finch-Ommaney to the foot of the stairs. Apparently she had been paying her bill, and her trunks and bundles awaited the porter. She stopped, seeing Berice, and the manager bowed and retired.

"I hope your husband has had a good night," she said, and then, without a pause, continued. "I wanted a word with you, Berice. . . . I don't know whether I ever thanked you expressly for coming to stay with me so soon before your marriage. Let me do so now. It was sweet of you, under the circumstances."

For a moment Berice stared. 'Under the circumstances?' . . . What circumstances? Did Mrs. Finch-Ommaney think she had marked down Harrison Emney as her own on sight?

"You meant it kindly, most kindly," Mrs. Finch-Ommaney continued; "but—under the circumstances, as I say—there's no reason we should pretend it was a great success. If you think it was, I must still hold the contrary view. Not that I expect you to understand me fully when I say that there are probably lights that you haven't got——"

For a moment Berice stood wondering whether it was among the 'lights she hadn't got' that, having seen Lionel, she should have been able to content herself with the lower level of a Harrison Emney.

"Knowledge of things is vouchsafed to us through a few chosen channels," Mrs. Finch-Ommaney continued. "I know you are inclined to be sceptical about these channels, so we'll not press the matter; but you'll admit that it is at least possible you're mistaken. There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in our philosophy, you know."

"Dear Mrs. Finch-Ommaney——" Berice began with outstretched hands.

"It's no good denying it," Mrs. Finch-Ommaney pursued loftily. "What we know we know. It doesn't lessen our knowledge that somebody else doesn't know we know. That's all I wish you to understand. I shall always be glad to see you at Undershaws when you are in the neighbourhood. Please convey my regrets to your husband that I haven't seen him. I think you said he was better? Things might

have been very different, but that's past. . . . *Bon voyage* to both of you."

She inclined her head and passed up the stairs. Mechanically Berice murmured a "*Bon voyage*"; then she made her explanation to the manager of the hotel, and went upstairs again like one in a dream.

What had Mrs. Finch-Ommaney meant? Anything, or nothing? Table-rapping, or—Walker? Knowledge that what might have been had not been—or that it *had* been? Blind guessing, or certitude? . . . 'What we know we know, and it does not lessen our knowledge that somebody else doesn't know that we know.' What *did* she know? . . . Whatever she knew, Celia, it was clear, knew nothing. . . . And then, again, she had hoped that Berice would call on her. Perhaps that was a way—it would certainly have the effect—of hinting that she need *not* call on her? Perhaps her idea, whatever it was, was but one of a thousand that ranged in her weak and empty head? Perhaps—perhaps—

But why trouble? Though Berice had asked her outright she would never, never have told. She was the kind of woman it would please to refuse to impart knowledge merely because somebody else wanted to share it. . . .

Not but that she might, had it not been for Harry, have known all; Berice would not have minded. For it did not matter now. The doctor had come again, accompanied by his very distinguished colleague, and, if the look on their faces meant anything, nothing now greatly mattered. They bade her have hope and courage, but that meant nothing; doctors always did that. No, it did not matter—or would not matter presently; for she knew, when the doctors peremptorily forbade all thought of sailing for many days to come, that the last scene of that tragi-comedy, her marriage, was approaching, and that it was not likely that Harry would ever leave Marseilles alive.

XXVI

ALTHOUGH he was forbidden to speak above a whisper, and was so ill that the food had to be placed to his lips, even in so small a matter as whether she or the nurse attended him his mood still varied. Sometimes, when he dozed with Berice's hand in his, she suffered her whole arm to become cramped rather than disturb him by withdrawing the hand; and at others it became equally a point of tact with her to allow him, since he appeared to wish it, to take his medicine and grapes and specially cooked chicken from Miss Burn's hands rather than from her own. Even in her weariness Berice sometimes felt a twinge of something like jealousy of the Scotswoman—jealousy that her professional ministrations had the preference; and more than once she packed her off with Marie for the afternoon in order that she might have Harry to herself. He now realized the gravity of his own state.

And yet he did not realize that she was no longer the same woman who, believing at the moment what she had said, had involved herself and him in that disastrous bargain. He still treated her at times as if she was. He sometimes remembered the words of her dead folly as if they had been the only words she had ever spoken, nor, when she remembered how it might be literally true that he had given, or at least shortened his life that she should escape, had she always the heart even to murmur a remonstrance. One day he ended a whispered generalization on the social scheme with the words, "But, of course, you don't think so—we always have differed about that."

"Oh, Harry—can't you see?" she murmured heart-brokenly. "If you can't I've no longer the heart to tell you. . . ."

“ Ah, you say so, but you don't really think so—we can't get away from our natures. That's been the real trouble—we're so different. We're only dull, we others; but you, you're light and free. Nature put you in one lot and me in another, and I suppose neither of us could help it. It was just bad luck. . . . Well, we find these things out when it's too late.—Where's Miss Burn? ”

“ She's gone out with Marie; she was up half the night.—But don't talk too much, dear.”

“ I'm feeling stronger to-day.—I understand that woman somehow. Miss Burn, I mean. She doesn't keep my mind always on the stretch. She's easy to follow. She makes me think, sometimes, that if I'd it all to go over again I wouldn't worry about things so much—would stay among my own people and let them be ambitious who were fools enough. I can't help thinking that would have been the best for both of us.”

She only shook her head as she stroked his brow, and he went on:

“ It would have been better for you, at any rate. You'd have married Hartopp—I saw long ago that he was in love with you—you'd have married him, and we shouldn't have tried, you and I, to bridge a gulf that was altogether too wide—altogether too wide.”

“ I don't regret it now if you don't, Harry,” she murmured, aching for him to say that he didn't regret it either; but he did not seem to hear her.

“ Altogether too wide,” he repeated as if to himself. . . . “ Well, I suppose it's like that general said about battles; those who live their lives best are those who make the fewest mistakes. I made one. . . .”

“ Dear! Dear!” she besought him. “ You know what the doctor said! Let me put my arm under your head and we'll just lie so, quietly and without thinking——”

“ Yes, yes. . . .”

“ There—there—close your eyes——”

He closed them; but in a minute or two he was whispering again.

“ What was I saying? I forget. . . . I think we're all

children really . . . all children, Berice . . . all children. . . . I was a shy sort of boy—I used to take long walks alone, talking to myself, I remember. . . . There was a bridge I used to walk out to, nine or ten miles from home. . . . Miss Burn knows it. . . . I used to go there. . . .”

He continued to murmur, with his eyes closed, about the bridge. Berice could not have told how she divined that he had been accustomed to meet a girl there. . . . He smiled faintly, and for a minute she thought he was asleep, but presently he murmured again.

“ And I used to think what I’d do when I’d saved a hundred pounds. . . . Marry, I thought at one time . . . but I was always what they called ambitious. . . . Miss Burn knows the bridge. . . .”

“ S-sh ! ”

“ Yes . . . yes . . . that’s what I used to think. . . .”

Presently he dozed ; and when, by and by, Miss Burn came in, her sandy hair all blown from a drive on the Corniche, Berice signed to her not to speak, and softly removed her arm from under Harry’s head.

An hour later she sent for Miss Burn to her own room and asked how he was. The nurse replied that he was still asleep.

“ Tell me the truth about him,” said Berice quietly.

For half a minute the nurse spoke in generalities, then Berice interrupted her with a gentle gesture.

“ Yes, I know all that. What I want to know is, will he ever leave here ? ”

“ He’ll not be fit to go to England until well into the spring,” Miss Burn replied.

“ Do you think he’ll be able to go to Algiers at all ? . . . Ah, I see you don’t. . . . Do you know of an English doctor here ? ”

Miss Burn did not know.

“ Will you ask Marie to find out, please ? Then I’ll ask Dr. Griffe’s permission to have him in too. Thank you. . . . I hope you enjoyed your drive ? ”

Berice went out of the hotel that afternoon, alone. She crossed glaring open spaces and wandered along dark, plantain-shaded streets, careless where her feet led her. Presently she

found herself in a small, steep, ornamental park, with shrubs and palms and fountains. From a little terrace she saw, through her green veil, piercingly flashing in the pale, hot sky, the golden Virgin that dominates the port—the Virgin of Notre Dame de la Garde. Only a short street's length from the foot of the garden lay the *ascenseurs* that took visitors up the precipitous rock on which the church stood; and Berice stood for a moment in hesitation and then descended to the garden again. At the end of the street she took her ticket at a little kiosk; she entered the lift, and a minute or two later she stepped from it again on to the blinding sunlit path that led to the ramparts. Lower down the hill a squad of soldiers passed; she ascended flights of white steps, and she bowed her head as, within the inner rampart, an old nun passed her with the bucket of water she had drawn from the little pump. Berice did not immediately enter the basilica, but rested against the parapet, looking now over the town spread out below her now to the far-off upheaval of mountains, and again out over the islands—the glittering, wrinkled sea that Harry, she knew, would never cross on his way to Africa. She stayed there for a quarter of an hour, and then she began to walk again. The entry of the church yawned like a black cavern before her, and she mounted the steps and went in.

She sat down on a chair, and did not immediately look about her; instead, she allowed the boons of shade and coolness to descend upon her and invade her. She could not have told what had drawn her so high above the town to this guardian church of the port, but something deep within her told her that she knew she would not have been elsewhere. For three days she had not set foot out of the hotel; now, on her first excursion, she had been led to a place where the votive tablets of countless Marseillois lined the walls and the models of rigged ships, touching and child-like offerings, moved slightly in the air, suspended on strings above her head.

She had not come to the church to pray. She had come only that she might, unseen, let go for an hour her hold on everything—cease to think, to feel, to order her tired limbs

and too long composed features. The chairs of the church were in rows, in sections of five or six ; she sat down on one of them with her arms and head supported by the back of the next ; and a dozen paces behind her the sunlight blazed like a furnace through the door by which she had entered.

Harry was dying. . . . It was no shock to her ; she seemed to have known it for a long, long time ; he was dying, and in a few days, a few hours, perhaps, it would be over. It was little more than a year since they had struck that fatal bargain of theirs, of freedom on her side and possessiveness and the desire for love on his ; and now that she no longer desired freedom she was to be made free indeed. . . . He knew it too, and his view of her approaching freedom had probably been expressed in the words, ' You'd have married Hartopp—I saw he was in love with you.' The bitterness was lasting quite, quite to the end ; as he had said, there's no escaping from our natures. It was as if he had said outright, " Marry Hartopp when I'm out of the way ; marry anybody ; any mistake you can now make will be trivial by the side of that you have made." He was probably reviewing it all again at this very moment, lying in the hotel there, with Miss Burn subtly prompting that steady look back by her very accent and appearance—was probably at the beginning of the years again, rewriting the blank page of his life differently, allotting her to Bunny, himself to—whom ? . . . Berice thought she knew ; probably to some stupid, docile maid who might break laws but would lack the wit to call laws into question—for that was the fatal mistake ; not the disobedience, but the denial. She, this Lowland wench whom Berice had never seen, probably older than Berice herself by this time, would not, that she might have her private fling, have called the public good into question ; she would not have been clever enough. . . . Clever ? It was the clever people who made all the mischief. They flung a word broadcast, not knowing on what ground it would fall, and perhaps in a hundred places up and down the land it bore such fruit as had made all the mischief of her own story. And each place into which it fell formed a fresh centre and origin for new reproduction. And so it spread, and still

spread, until not the honour and faith of this man or that woman alone was infected, but the great Ideas of faith and honour caught it and withered. . . . Berice was discovering for herself the profundity of the word that man is made for Society, and is neither capable of living alone nor has the courage to do it. Better be stricken than outcast. That lass whom Harry had met long ago by 'the bridge that Miss Burn knew' had been infinitely wiselier guided to submit than others were to rebel. . . .

And Berice found herself presently meditating again on the rarity, even among these countless multiplied exceptions, of The Exception! She wondered now how she had ever supposed that it could be otherwise. For it was not possible that everything could be equally for everybody. The finer the thing, the greater the skill and knowledge and reverence for the task that have gone to its making—yes, and the less obviously seen its meaning and function—the less may clumsy hands be laid upon it and rash, unskilled and slovenly-thinking minds devise its mending. Fine things are for the admiration, not for the handling, of the multitude. There is other work for the many, not less useful, and far more necessary for the saving of their own souls. Private safety was not difficult of attainment; let these take it as it was given to them, and not, in their myriad-minded exceptionalness, seek to compass the destruction of that—be it law, custom, code, institution, convention, or whatever else of slow, strong growth—in which only resides the safety of all. . . .

Berice, lying inert on her two chairs and wearily thinking despite her endeavours not to think, was not yet invaded by the spirit of the high sanctuary; but presently, moving a little, she became more conscious of her surroundings. They were the votive tablets on the walls which she first saw; and then, again changing her attitude, she became conscious of the ships above her head. The tablets, squares of brown marble not more than a foot and a half long, were set edge to edge, crowded together far up the church walls, and each was a simple acknowledgment of the sparing of a son, a father, a husband, a brother, from the sea. The ships dangled

above her in tiers, three or four ships to each pair of strings, swinging a little from time to time—rude models, fashioned in the leisure hours between the puttings-forth, carved with chisel and penknife, doubtless while the fisherman had smoked his pipe and sought his little blocks and pulleys among the soup-plates and fragments of bread of the morning or evening meal. And they had come to the church with them in their hands, their humble spikenard and frankincense and myrrh. Tablets and ships, the church was full of them; and only the gilded Virgin on the roof of the basilica rose higher, while far below, bowered with the shady plantains, lay the crowded streets of the town. . . .

As Berice's eyes grew accustomed to the gloom of the place, and now and then a name or an initial seemed to start forth of itself from the paved and dedicated walls, vague and floating and unseizable images began to pass before her mind. She found no words for them, she did not see them in bounded and recognizable forms; but she became increasingly conscious of their immanence and significance. They were images of large and unchanging things, and, if she had had to express them, she would have done so in terms of the place—in terms of the modelled ships and the lettered squares of marble put there by the men whose work lay upon the solemn, beguiling, treacherous sea. . . . And she seemed to be looking on at these men now as they hauled their nets or drew in the deep-lines: fought with the screaming devils of the squall: and then, when calm came, put out their nets again. Their work done, they returned home, and then, after many days, carved a child's toy in the service of their Preserver. . . . Heroisms, doubts, fumbling and undexterous hands, watchings, vast desires, petty achievements, tears, vows, despairs, failures, and incredibly renewed resolutions—all these found no more expression than a carved "*En Reconnaissance, Marie*" that a monumental mason doubtless ran off by the day together, a rigged brig or barque that a child might push out over the surface of a pond. . . . And probably the sea had spared fathers, brothers, husbands, sons, for a short time only, and would claim a good half of them at the last—had probably already claimed them. . . . It was

moving, moving. A catacomb of the bones of these could hardly have been more moving than these pious expressions of hopes that had found their fulfilment only in heaven. Was it worth while to dedicate ships already doomed, to render thanks for the life that had only been spared now to be taken later? These names, these initials, to be read by eyes that had never seen the owners of them—this old, old piety, that left, as it were, in the mind no more than the odour of stale incense about the place . . . was it worth while? . . .

The doubt filled Berice's heart for long; it seemed to her that it was not worth while. . . . Then the shadow lifted a little, and a thrill at which she unconsciously raised her head ran through her. . . . Again the shadow lifted; and again came the thrill; and then, grandly and suddenly, all doubt was swept away in a triumphant asseveration. The place was *no* catacomb, but a place of Life—of Life, Life, Life—in which the courage and faithfulness and reverence of men were imperishably enscrolled, undimmed, and splendid. Anything less than these had no victory. The boastful sea took men, but not manhood; over men's bones it rages throughout the years that bones are all of man that it gets. And man made it contemptuously welcome to them. He vowed his body as a possible sacrifice each time he put out through the surf or cleared the jetty-head in his barque. He died daily in the acceptance of the fact that he might not return. That of him which did *not* perish had its temple elsewhere, and faith and humility and hope and love were the four walls of it.

And the peace of these things communicated itself to Berice's heart. Ah, that that also might be so walled and fortified, though space be left within for but the tiniest of altars and the feeblest of flames! . . . For that other Sea, of Life, that dances its wild saraband not over the bones, but over the dead hearts of men, had had power over her also. She had been at its mercy, and yet she had hung up no votive ship, had carved no emblem of thanksgiving that she had not been engulfed. For now that she stood removed from so much, and was presently to be removed from still more, she

knew how nearly she had been swallowed up. But for some Lady of Guardianship she had not survived. No need to inquire again *how* that safety had been accomplished, nor to tell herself that for her sake this life had been burdened and that shortened; all such debts are vicariously quitted. It made no difference whether that sacred Fund from which payment had been made was the stable and basic goodness of Humanity, or whether indeed that Vicar was the adored Babe in the arms of the gilded Virgin that watched over the sea and town and mountains of Marseilles. She had her soul at last, and would not lose it again. . . .

Then, with a little bewildered shock that she should be thinking unfamiliar things almost clearly, she saw more clearly still the whole meaning of those trivial ships and bald and devout tablets. Any man with baseness enough in his heart might smile at their childish symbolism—might show them to be imperfect—and might pull them down. It was but a cut with the knife of wit and cleverness. Nay, secular Time itself would pull them down. . . . But if they came down, Truth, ever heavy with the gestation of symbols, and without a parable hardly speaking to the multitude, would for all serviceable purposes come down with them. Only by symbols can the precious stuff of one heart be communicated to other hearts. Only so can warning of the world's enemy be given. That enemy triumphs when man's work is destroyed, for there is no work of man's hands, done in reverence and fear, but is in some sort his symbol of the imperishable Essence within him and his wall and bulwark against the night of uninvention and chaos. The fiends of that outer region where there is no time because there is no human measurement of time, no space because all is void and without relation, never cease their assaults; and it is for man to guard his walls and towers and to slay the traitor and spy whom he finds in the heart of the citadel. And those who are not the captains and governors and engineers of the place must watch, and be thankful that in return for their watching they have their rations. That they may not be led into temptation must be their prayer—the temptation of a vain ambition and a responsibility their souls cannot meet.

Berice now sought only to guard that flickering flame on the altar newly dedicated within herself, and to hang up perhaps a toy ship, or three simple words of gratitude that mercy had been shown her.

She was almost lighthearted when she came out of the church again and took the dazzlingly white path to the *ascenseur*. She turned once to look at the flaming golden Virgin, and then the machine into which she had stepped began its steep descent, passing the ascending car half-way. She left the fortified rock, threaded narrow, shady streets, and then, coming into the Rue de Rome, boarded a tram. It stopped opposite her hotel, and she alighted.

But opposite the door of the hotel she saw Marie, the French maid, standing bareheaded under one of the pavement trees with her hand to her eyes, looking this way and that. The maid saw Berice, and ran to her.

“ Oh, madame—*venez vite, venez vite ! . . .*”

“ Is he——? ” Berice could not get out the words.

“ *Non—non, non, non—mais montez, vite ! . . .*”

Berice caught up her skirts and ran to Harry's room.

The three doctors were there, the two French ones and the Englishman ; the English doctor supported him on one side and Miss Burn on the other. He was sitting upright in bed, and his breathing made the noise a hookah makes. From time to time he gasped a word.

Berice's arm slid into the place Miss Burn's had occupied. He tried to say something to her.

“ Don't let him talk,” Berice heard a man's voice say quietly and peremptorily. . . . “ A little more upright . . . very gently. . . .”

Minutes passed, in a silence only broken by that hookah-like noise of his breathing. Softly Miss Burn removed Berice's veil and hat for her. Berice's eyes looked a question into those of the English doctor ; his shoulders moved with a little acquired foreign movement. . . . “ Any moment,” Berice understood the gesture to mean. . . .

Harry's eyes were closed, but his head moved and his brows knitted slightly with each breath he took. “ Perfectly

still," the English doctor murmured again. . . . Marie had sunk to her knees in a corner. Miss Burn had put her hand under the coverlets to the dying man's feet. One of the French doctors was looking at his watch.

Suddenly the English doctor muttered a hurried "No, no! . . ." Harry was trying to speak again. He didn't seem to see Berice. His reddish-brown eyes looked out from their inflamed pink whites straight beyond the foot of the bed.

"No, no, darling!" Berice cried hastily, after the English doctor. . . .

But already he was bringing broken words out. The low, hookah-like breathing had changed to the noise of a boiling pot. He gasped and bubbled.

"For—a blind—hour—ah, ah . . . for a—blind hour. . . ."

"More upright!" muttered the doctor between his teeth.

"—blind hour—forget—fulness—ah, ah, ah, ah. . . ."

Berice did not know whether these words of his closing agony were for her or for himself; she had no time to think. The English doctor had risen, stepped away and turned his back, leaving him now to her; from the corner of the room Marie's prayers sounded more loudly, and Harry had clutched at her neck. For a moment his eyes met hers; his clutch tightened, and she called his name as he twisted in her arms. Then the end came. . . .

"Harry!" she cried. . . .

Miss Burn had sprung forward. As he fell back she hurriedly covered the lower part of his face with a napkin. Berice was aware of the English doctor at her elbow, quietly drawing her away.

"Come now," he whispered in her ear. . . . "I needn't say that I'm entirely at your service," he added, as he led her to the door. . . .

XXVII

THE events that followed immediately on Harry's death—the scene in the cemetery at Marseilles, the return to the hotel to pack up, the rush, two days later, through the Côte d'Or, and the three hours in Paris and the crossing to Dover—presented themselves to Berice as a phantasmagoria, jumbled and without historical sequence. Only with her recital of them to Everard, who met her at Victoria and returned with her to the house on the Embankment, did they begin to fall into order. Nor would they have done so then but for the judicious prompting of her uncle's questions.

“Poor chap, poor chap!” Everard sighed. . . . “Well, you were lucky at the finish to have your French-speaking maid and to run across that English doctor.”

“Yes,” said Berice. “They took it all off my hands. I was just made to lie down, and they did everything. . . Miss Burn's decided to stay there, by the way. Dr. Clay said there was a good opening in Marseilles for an English nurse.”

“A Scotch one,” Everard amended. “They always leave Scotland to tell the rest of the world what a grand country it is. There's always a bit of the auld burn-side about Scotch people.”

“Yes,” said Berice musingly. . . .

Her thoughts seemed to remain on the subject of the Scotch nurse, for presently she continued:

“Yes. . . . It was Harry's wish that I should make her a present, and the sum I gave her should start her handsomely. She would have liked to go into the Army, but she didn't know anybody at head-quarters. Do you, by the way?”

“I can't say that I do. Hartopp might. But you say she's settling in Marseilles?—”

"Yes, she's settling there," said Berice absently. . . .

As the day wore on Everard seemed a little uneasy about leaving her alone; he murmured something about 'company' and 'taking her thoughts off it'; and presently he asked whether she could put him up for the night. She could, and he wrote a note to his Bloomsbury hotel that his things should be sent on.

"That will be better," he said. "And if you'll take my advice you'll have a mustard bath and get off to bed. I'll arrange about the other things that are to be done. . . ."

And then she knew that Everard's latest jacket involved visits to executors and lawyers and the necessary formalities of the probate of a will. She smiled, kissed him, and retired.

The jacket cropped up the next morning at breakfast. He asked questions, to which Berice could give only general answers. She gave him the name of Harry's solicitors.

"Good," quoth Everard, rubbing his hands. "You can safely leave all that to me. I'll attend to all that. I'll go this morning."

"Thanks, Ev. Shall you be back in time for tea? I have Mrs. Enright coming this afternoon."

"Oh, you won't want me. You have your talk with Mrs. Enright. I'll come back to dinner, I think."

"Of course. I should be greatly obliged if you could stay here for the present."

"I dare say it would be better," Everard agreed.

He kissed her, and presently went out as if he intended that probate of Harry's will should be effected by midday or he would know the reason why.

Berice had wondered a little at her own haste even as she had sent Mollie a note from Dover. A hundred times in the last few days Mollie's face had intruded into her blurred and jumbled impressions of flying vineyards, chocolate snatched at French stations, and memories of that last scene in the hotel that looked down the Cannebière; and each time it had associated itself, for no very obvious reason, with the mood of that solemn hour she had spent among the ships and votive tablets of the church of Notre Dame de la Garde. She felt that something she could not precisely define, but

none the less momentous on that account, depended thenceforward on the nature of her relation with Mollie.

For there was a perfection of intercourse to be attempted. Hitherto they had communed only by looks, touches, subtle processes of mere proximity; but now, by virtue of something, she knew not what, that had happened to her, their intercourse demanded the beautiful garment of open expression. By as much as speech was unrequired, so it now became important, as in some superfluities there resides a grace and lovely high decorum. She would hang up her poor toy ship in the temple in which, she knew, both she and Mollie served.

Mollie came at four o'clock. Berice was sitting on a sofa in the drawing-room, and was in the act of rising when Mollie made a quick little gesture, crossed to her, and took her head between her hands and drew it to her shoulder. With some women the movement would have been the signal for an immediate outpouring, but Berice merely let her head sink into the place prepared for it and closed her eyes with a long, easy sigh. . . . It was a couple of minutes before Mollie put Berice's face back again, kissed it, and sat up.

"I needn't say anything, dear? . . ."

"No."

"You know all I'd say."

"Yes."

"Let me pour out tea. Put this cushion behind you. . . . Well, and how are *you*? Let me look at you. . . . H'm! . . . Well, I still think that under any other circumstances it would have been criminal folly in you to travel. . . ."

Miss Burn had told Berice the same thing. . . .

A phrase at a time Berice told Mollie all the circumstances of Harry's death. Once or twice as she did so Mollie's hand sought hers for a moment. She ended. There was a long pause. Then, in a lower voice, she said:

"That's all about that. Now I want to tell you something else."

"Yes?"

"I wanted to tell you long, long ago; but I wasn't allowed. I may do so now. That's why I do so at once."

“What is it?”

“Oh, how I wanted to tell you!—” Berice breathed, closing her eyes for a moment.

“Tell me. . . .”

It would no longer be a taking of a burden from her own shoulders and a laying of it on another's. It had ceased to be a burden. Even the thing done, and never to be undone, does not become a burden for ever when we have found each for ourselves our hidden way of manumission. . . .

Briefly, baldly almost, beginning and ending within five minutes by the clock, Berice told Mollie.

Mollie sat, as she had sat throughout Berice's recital, with her eyes apparently fixed on some distance beyond the opposite wall of the room. For a minute after Berice had finished she remained silent; then she murmured softly to herself:

“It was *that*, then! . . .”

“That,” said Berice. . . . “So you wondered?”

“Eh? . . . Of course; you knew I did.” Still her eyes looked through the opposite wall.

“Yes,” said Berice.

“You knew I wondered—and that I did more than wonder.”

“What more? You guessed?” Berice asked.

“Oh, no, I didn't guess, but”—Mollie turned quickly and impulsively towards her—“I cared—oh, you knew I cared!” Gently they kissed.—And that was the end of that.

“And so Bunny knew!—” Mollie mused after a time.

“Yes, he knew.”

“Poor Bunny! . . . Will you tell me something else, Berice?”

“What?”

“Did Bunny ever ask you to marry him?”

Berice shook her head.

“No. . . . Of course, I guessed he'd spoken to you about me.”

“Yes—in a way.”

“As much as he could without giving me away. I understand. I was very rough on him. Poor Bunny! . . .”

Mollie's fingers had begun to move softly on the edge of the tea-tray, but her eyes were now on the carpet. Suddenly she looked up.

"Suppose he asks you to marry him now?" she asked.

"Oh! . . ."

"He will."

"So Harry seemed to think."

"He will—I think *I* should if I were a man."

"Dear! . . . Well, I can only hope that he won't."

"Oh?" said Mollie rather quietly. "Why?"

Berice smiled and sighed. "Bunny?" she asked softly. . . .

"Well? . . ."

"Bunny? . . . Oh, Mollie, you know without my telling you! Poor, poor Bunny! . . . But he wouldn't understand. . . ."

"H'm! . . . I thought you'd just been telling me that he'd understood all along."

Berice smiled again. "Oh, *that!* . . . Yes, he understood that! He saw all the dreadful entanglement it was . . . oh, Mollie, Mollie!" She closed her eyes for a moment and her brow was drawn in pain even with the pale memory of it. . . . "I mean, Bunny would never understand why I should have to refuse him."

"H'm!" said Mollie again. . . . "I can't quite say I do either."

"Oh, yes, you do, but you won't say so. It's not—it's not anything about having burdened one man and taking care not to burden another—it's not that at all—and it isn't an expiation, if that's the word, either—it's nothing of that sort——"

"That's all what it isn't," said Mollie, with the faintest suspicion of a twinkle. "It's what it *is* that I'm waiting to know."

"I know—but it's so hard to put. What I mean is—I'm not saying what anybody else ought to do, you understand—you'd be quite wrong to do it, I dare say—it's myself—what I feel *I* ought to do——"

"Not marry Bunny. . . . Well, my dear, your talk's so very much like his at present that I can't help thinking

you'd make an excellent pair. . . . It's your exquisite reason I'm waiting for."

"Oh, don't pretend you don't know perfectly well what I mean—that I simply can't! If I'd thought you wouldn't see that I'd never have told you."

"You mean you won't?" Mollie said, fairly twinkling now, but perhaps understanding better than she admitted.

"Very well—I just *won't*—there!" Berice declared, half vexed at the haltingness of her own exposition and half laughing at Mollie. "Besides——"

"Besides what?"

"Well, there's . . . you know."

"Of course there's that. . . . When? . . ."

"In May. . . ."

Mollie nodded, and then shrugged her shoulders lightly.

"Well, I warn you that you'll have some difficulty in making Bunny understand, that's all; it's about as clear as mud to me. Anyhow, your soul's your own affair—I'm going to look after the rest of you. . . . May, you say? . . ."

A few minutes passed. . . . Then Berice gave a little laugh.

"So you see," she said. . . . "But if it hadn't been for that I think I should have taken up nursing—probably the Army branch. My uncle once said I should never make a nurse; well, but for this I should have shown him. And that reminds me of another thing, Mollie. There's Everard. And there's Mrs. Finch-Ommaney and Celia Chester. Let me tell you. . . ."

She related her meeting with Mrs. Finch-Ommaney and Celia in Marseilles.

"What ought I to do?" she concluded.

Mollie took a full minute to reply, but when she did speak it was with decision enough.

"Nothing," she said.

"Not even—I told you how ambiguously she spoke—not even though she knows nothing at all?"

"Not even anything. Say nothing. Nor to your uncle neither. What's the good now?"

Berice actually gave a little laugh of triumph. "There!"

she exclaimed. "Now do you see what I meant a moment ago?"

"The meaning's still rather rarefied," said Mollie demurely.

"I'll make you see. You advise me to say nothing to Ev nor Mrs. Finch-Ommaney. In other words, you advise suppression, concealment, hushing-up, all the horrible things I've been doing all along. Now *could* I, could I *possibly* do as you say unless the whole thing was ten thousand leagues behind me, and everything was so changed that even common honesty did not enter into the question?"

"H'm—m!—"

"Or could you advise it?"

"Oh, I'm capable of any depravity for the sake of peace and quietness," Mollie remarked.

"There—I *knew* you knew!" said Berice, with shining eyes. She knew that her heart and her friend's were at one by virtue of the common denominator of all they held fine and dear. . . .

"Can't you stay to dinner?" Berice urged when, half an hour later, Mollie rose. "That is, unless . . ."

"Thanks, but I think I'll avail myself of the 'unless' . . . Murragh. . . ."

"Bless you both!"

"Such anticipations!" murmured Mollie, with worlds of comical difference between the perfect self-possession of her voice and the bashful attempt of her downcast eyes. "Not till Christmas, anyway. . . . Well, I'm glad you don't impose your notions of duty on *me*. Thanks for that. . . . Poor Bunny! . . ."

And with another "Poor Bunny!" she took her leave, and Berice ordered dinner for herself and Everard only.

With Everard's appearance, a little before seven o'clock, it was instantly plain that something had gone wrong with the business that had occupied him during the day. He gave her a mechanical greeting. "Well, Berice—Mrs. Enright been?" and then began to pace the hearth. Presently he stood tugging at his moustache and looking down into the fire. Berice asked him whether he was going to

dress. "Yes, yes—in a moment," he said, and then began to pace the room again.

"Is anything wrong?" Berice asked.

He stopped in his walk, stood before her, and looked at her gravely.

"I'm afraid there is," he said. "An extraordinary thing's happened—a most unaccountable thing."

"What is it?" she asked, already prepared to be alarmed.

"I've been to see both your husband's executors, and also his solicitors," said Everard.

"Well?"

But Everard was walking up and down again, muttering, "Unaccountable, unaccountable!" Then once more he faced Berice.

"Did your husband say anything to you about the terms of his will?" he asked.

"Yes. What is it?" said Berice quickly.

"Do you remember what he said about its provisions?"

She stated the provisions as far as she remembered them—Harry's collections, the distant relative whom he had intended to include, and the general bequest of the bulk to herself. Already a nameless foreboding had come over her. . . .

"And when did he tell you all this—recently?"

"Within the last month or two. Oh, what is it, Ev?"

Everard was walking up and down again.

"Had you quarrelled?" he next demanded.

"No—no—it couldn't be called a quarrel—perhaps things might have fallen out more happily——"

"H'm! . . . Well, unless it's upset—some time must pass, it appears, before probate—what's happened is this——"

—Thereupon he told her. A new will had been made. She was not excluded from it; nay, she participated handsomely in it, as handsome goes; three thousand pounds a year were set aside for her during her lifetime, the capital sum to await his child in reversion. But—it was at this that objects seemed to become suddenly dull and dark before Berice's eyes—a like sum had been settled upon this remote relation in Glasgow he had seen only once, and smaller, but

still considerable, sums went to people with even fewer claims upon him. Everard had also learned during the day that the 'reconstruction' which was to have set him once for all free from business had been abandoned. . . . She hardly heard the rest. . . .

She felt for a chair and sat down slowly on it. The new will must have been made immediately before they had left England. Her mind strove to grasp its provisions. . . .

Not in their material significance; ah, no, not that; that would never have troubled her. A quite small proportion of three thousand pounds a year would have sufficed for all her material needs; it was not that. It was, rather, that even in this posthumous revelation there appeared that division of his nature that, now inclining to love and weakness and sorrow and tears, and now stiffening again to justice interpreted without clemency, had tormented him ever since that morning when, had he bidden her, she would have sought the revolver in the drawer in his dressing-room. He had treated her well enough, but it was for all the world as if he had carefully scrutinized her claim, grumbled at it, economized on it, docked it of an item here, queried another item there, referred it back debited with expenses and charged with interest at five per cent. In spite of all, she had *not* had his trust. A stranger whom he had seen only once was trusted equally with herself. As a dead man had grinned up at him from the grave, so from the grave *he* put a checking and restraining hand on her. His last act had been, as far as he could, to ensure it that her punishment should be in perpetuity. . . .

And he had abandoned the 'reconstruction'—she had proved such a disappointment to him that he had repudiated that 'cleverest thing he had ever done,' and had intended to remain in business for the rest of his days. . . .

"And in the event of my marrying again?" she asked dully. This last revelation of his nature had numbed her.

"Nothing's said about that," said Everard.

"Nothing's said. . . ." she repeated, as if it was a lesson. . .

Narrow, misunderstanding, rabidly just to the last! Resolved that she should meet with scrupulously fair treatment,

have absolutely no cause for complaint! He had counted up her sufferings—he had estimated that she had suffered to the exact amount of three thousand pounds a year! Had he lived he might in time have written off her heartache and tears to the tune of another thousand. . . .

And she knew, too, that, had he lived, the hour of gentleness and pardon would have claimed him again. . . .

“Nor was anything said about what would happen in the event of an attempt to set aside the will,” Everard was saying. . . .

He suddenly seemed to Berice to be speaking from an immense distance—an immense distance. The dimensions of the room, too, seemed to have altered curiously, and a sort of grey mist was invading it from somewhere or other. . . .

“No—no, no—don’t contest it,” she muttered, swaying a little. . . . Everard had given a short exclamation, and had sprung to her side.

“Steady, Berice—steady! Are you ill? What’s the matter? . . . Good gracious!—”

She had fallen from the chair, setting the fire-irons clattering. Her body was twisted. She seemed in agony. . . .

He saw what it was. He sprang to a bell and rang violently. She still writhed. A servant appeared.

“Quick,” he cried, “a doctor! Send a couple of women up here—women, you understand—run——”

Her journey, her emotion of the last few weeks, her spiritual release of that afternoon, and this last illumination coming on the top of all, had done their work. It was not to be, as she had told Mollie, in May; it had come upon her now. . . .

XXVIII

DURING three weeks Mollie nursed her, taking up her abode in the house; and then she packed her off to Bournemouth for a fortnight, herself running down for a couple of week-ends. At the end of that time Berice returned home, completely restored to health. Thereafter, now that the course of her life was again changed, she was busy with many affairs. She had decided to leave the house on the Embankment; and though, according to Harry's will, it was left to her whether or not his collections became public property during her lifetime, she no longer wished to be burdened with the responsibility of them, and had already, with Everard, made preliminary arrangements for their transference. They were to go to Harry's own town. Everard was waited on one morning by a couple of Scotchmen with a good deal of "the auld burn side" about them; they took an inventory, and had lunch; and in due course there reached Berice the town's thanks enclosed in an oaken casket, with a blue satin cushion inside the lid.

As long as he might but have a finger in the business, Everard was as happy in making away these bequests as he would have been in acquiring them; but, though he made no remark, Berice knew very well what he privately thought of certain decisions she herself had come to. For she had told him that she intended to reserve to her own use no more of her property than would suffice to give her a nursing training, and already Sir John Hartopp had been given to understand that, manage matters as he liked, he must take it upon himself to see that there should be a place for her on the Army nursing list when she should be ready for it. Should she still be embarrassed with money, she

anticipated little difficulty in being able to get rid of it once the secretaries of hospitals got her name upon their lists.

And against the hums and haws both of Sir John and the Tracys, Berice received noble support from Mollie Enright.

"They say those command best who know how to obey, and I can give her an excellent character as a patient," Mollie said. . . . "Yes, it may be foolishness, Mr. Beckwith (I see that's what you're thinking), but it's her own special brand, and she won't be happy without it. You think she ought to marry again. Well, there are more ways than one of bringing things to that pass. . . ."

And her innuendoes, and suggestions that young officers only married elsewhere when there no longer remained a young and attractive Army nurse unattached, lasted until Berice took her by the shoulders and fairly turned her out of the room.

"She can't think of anything but weddings with her own so near," said Berice. "Well, we must look to Murragh Neill to give her a shaking. . . ."

It needs to be said twice, if once saying is not sufficient, that Berice had not been allowed to make her decision without representations of the strongest nature from Bunny. During her illness he had called daily, and he had called again immediately after her return from Bournemouth. It had then appeared that what he had called for was to know "what all this nonsense was about. . . ."

"This isn't true what Mollie Enright tells me, that you're going in for nursing?" he had demanded, in pretty much the tone he might have used had he heard that she was going in for tattooing or shaving her head.

"Quite true," Berice had replied. "I hope you've come to tell me what a charming nurse I shall make."

But Bunny hadn't come to do anything of the kind. He had made an impatient gesture.

"But why?" he had demanded abruptly. "What's the good of that?"

"'Why?' . . . Don't you think I should look charming?" Berice had sought to rally him.

"Oh, hang your looks! What have they got to do with it?"

"I see. You think, like Everard, that I should make a rotten nurse——"

Bunny had given her a saturnine look of love.

"Do you really mean with cuffs, and an apron, and streamers on your bonnet, and all the rest of it?"

"Oh, the cuffs are 'dress'—I don't think they wear those when there's work to be done. I'm not sure about the streamers, but I think I shall have a red cross on my arm. . . ."

"Good Lord! . . ."

And thereupon, in order that Berice should not take this headstrong way *faute de mieux*, Bunny had stammeringly offered her an alternative.

"Don't do that, Berice. Marry me—marry me, dear—not now, of course, but later—chuck all this other, and marry me——"

But Berice had shaken her head, gently, but quite seriously.

"Dear Bunny," she had said, "I can't. You must believe me when I give that as the reason, *toute courtoise*—I can't. I know talking wouldn't make it any plainer to you. Please, dear, spare me, and just take it quite simply that I can't."

"What rot!" Bunny had broken out, making love after methods entirely his own. . . . "Don't be so silly, dear. This other's only a headstrong notion."

He had urged her until she had yielded so far as to try to explain, and then there had been two of them at loggerheads for want of words. It was difficult to make Bunny see the things that had such potency over her own soul. . . . And then Bunny had begun to hurl reproaches at himself.

"Is it because I was such a brute to you, Berice? Oh, I was a bear, a self-sufficient idiot! . . . But I only wanted to keep you out of frightful messes, darling—oh, rotten messes! . . . I know now I ought either to have said more or else nothing at all—I ought to have said that I knew all about it or else shut up—but I loved you so, even then—I loved you so!——"

“ Oh, Bunny, don't bring all that up again ! ” she had supplicated. . . .

“ The opinionated ass I was !——”

“ But you were quite right. How I wish I'd listened to you instead of pretending not to understand ! . . . And I know what you told Murragh Neill too ; oh, I know that in one way or another I've let everybody in ! I thought nobody but myself need know anything ; now it seems to me that anybody with eyes might have known everything, any time !——”

“ Oh, if I'd only said everything, and asked you then !——” Bunny had groaned.

“ No, no—I really don't know whether I'd have had you—I don't really think I'd sense enough—I'm nearer now to that than ever I was—but there's something nearer still, Bunny, nearer still. . . . Oh, if only I could make you see what it was !——”

“ If only you could ! ” Bunny had said, his eyes streaming.

But she knew, and knew that time would only confirm her knowledge, that what she had got out of that hour in Notre Dame de la Garde must ever remain incommunicable to Bunny. . . .

It was odd with what security and gaiety she could now skim the surface of immeasurable deeps. She could not, of course, be present at Mollie's wedding, a few days before Christmas ; but Mollie acted an ingenuousness, which Berice demurely took up, and men and weddings and love sometimes became subjects for jest between the two experienced women as if they had been a pair of schoolgirls. Had their hearts not been anchored in peace they might have seemed merely examples of the rage and resolution to be young that sometimes seems the more to increase the more real youth slips away ; but it was not that. It is not that any more when we have spent our hours in our Notre Dames de la Garde. . . . They shared incommunicable things, and it made no difference that what the one was accepting the other was refusing for ever.

The hospital Berice had determined to enter as a probationer was Guy's. Twice on preliminary visits Mollie had

accompanied her ; and one day as, on the top of a 'bus, they drew near London Bridge, Mollie said suddenly :

" But supposing there'd been that baby to be thought of ? You couldn't have done this then."

" No. But for that matter I couldn't have done it if I myself had left it much longer," Berice replied. " I'm within a few months of the age limit for probationers as it is. But a way always seems to open for us."

" H'm ! I suppose you mean by that that out of a dozen impossible ways there's one that's just endurable, and we take it."

" H'm ! " retorted Berice in her turn ; " and you just going to be married ! . . . Murragh shall hear of this ! . . . And by the way, it may be news to your ladyship that I could have had your man myself if I'd wanted ! "

" What ?—That you never could ! " Mollie vowed roundly.

" Couldn't I ? How do you know ? "

" How do I know ? How do you think ? I asked him, of course."

" Wretch ! . . . "

" I did. He came back to London wearying my ears with some splendid woman or other he'd met——"

" Ah !——" said Berice more quietly.

"—and I said he could have his splendid woman for all I cared—quite a scene, my dear. Oh, I've not told you half how curious I was to see you that night at Lady Haverford's ! "

" I wonder he didn't jump at his chance of getting out of it," Berice remarked.

" It was so that he shouldn't that I offered it," Mollie replied demurely.

" You outrageous coquette ! . . . But there are still a few weeks——"

" Too late, my dear. He thinks too highly of you—now."

" Now ? . . . Then you've——? "

" Yes ; Murragh ; nobody else, of course. You don't mind that ? I didn't want to miss that chance of honouring you."

"You two dears!" murmured Berice with a little rising in her throat.

But Mollie was quick to avoid any too near emotion. "Oh, you don't know a quarter of the things you have to thank me for yet," she said as they descended from the 'bus at London Bridge. But there was a gentle light in her own eyes as they made their way among warehouses to the hospital, and they kept that light during the quarter of an hour in which she waited for Berice, pacing up and down the loveliest courtyard in the City. . . .

Berice reappeared again, and she advanced to meet her.

"Well, have you settled it?"

"Yes. I'm to begin in the New Year."

"So soon? . . . Well, the tale ends with a wedding, after all—though not with yours," Mollie said as they passed out of the gates. . . .

It may at any rate end with the eve of a wedding. On the night before Mollie's marriage she, Berice, Bunny, and Neill supped together at the small house on the north side of Kensington Gardens. The entrance hall of Mrs. Enright's house was disfurnished, and trunks and packages stood ready to be removed at the Christmas quarter—Neill had taken a house and studio in Holland Park. The dining-room, however, was untouched, as was Mollie's bedroom, to which she took Berice on her arrival.

"It looks like the end, doesn't it?" Mollie said as Berice removed her wraps. "These things, too, go to-morrow. A lot of care goes with them."

Berice, remembering what she had heard of Mollie's previous marriage, made no reply.

"And you," Mollie continued: "are you all packed up?"

"My own things are. The house doesn't matter so much. It was Harry's, so we're independent of quarter days. Ev's 'putting it on the market,' as he says—I cannot get him to say 'selling it.' . . . Poor Ev! Tokenhouse Yard's his Mecca nowadays, for he's selling Skirethorns, too, our Yorkshire home. He only kept it for me, he says. . . ."

"Poor uncle!" Mollie sighed lightly.

"Yes. . . . It rather solves a difficulty for me, though.

I told you about Ev's Standard Motor Alarm (it's exactly like a sea-lion barking, my dear). It only needs capital to 'develop it,' he says, and, of course, I did so want to be allowed to find the capital—but I know he'd never have let me, and as a matter of fact I never mentioned it. So Skirethorns will provide it. It'll go the way of the rest, I suppose; but it doesn't matter as long as it keeps him happy. The Beckwiths have no heads for money."

"They've very good heads for getting rid of it, to judge from that wonderful dessert service you've given Murragh and me."

"Oh, that! . . . But that's not really your wedding present; that's only to glitter among your other things. I should like to give you something else. Come here——"

Mollie was arranging a scarf about her shoulders. For a moment Berice helped her in the draping of it. When she removed her hands again the scarf was secured in its place with a plain gold safety-pin.

"I told you what it was," said Berice, her eyes on her friend's. "Will you have it? . . ."

A few minutes later they had descended to supper. Berice sat at the little square table facing Mollie; Bunny was on her right, Neill on her left. Bunny either did not see or did not remember the little gold fastening that glinted in the candle-light at Mollie's breast, but Neill did, and glanced once towards Berice and quickly away again. It was a year and a half since he had seen that same pin at Berice's own throat, in the painting cottage on Cotterdale Moor—when he had so honoured her for her supposed resolution to take up her life again with all its pains and pangs and rubs and responsibilities. . . . Yes, he had honoured her then that she did not intend to stand off from the world and its affairs; why, then, she wondered, did his eyes now honour her past all telling, in the very moment when she had renounced for ever so many human ties and was about to take upon herself a secular retirement? If she had been so to be honoured before, why this homage now? . . . She wondered, and by and by sought Neill's eyes.

"Why? . . ."

The question was, in fact, unspoken—looked only, and at one and the same moment she tingled with apprehension lest he should not understand, and thrilled with the certainty that he would. “Why? . . .” came the look again.

He did understand. Her eyes, blue and tranquil, were on his, large and dark and reverent in his high-bred, hound-like face. Then he inclined his head slightly towards her.

“You know what I thought you were?” he murmured in a voice that none but she heard.

She nodded. “Yes.”

Once more he lifted his eyes. They were as the eyes of a sweet boy are who is permitted to kiss a hand.

“It’s true now, at any rate,” he whispered back. “You *are* magnificent. . . .”

And as there came across the table a request from Mollie to be told what they were talking about, they laughed, but did not tell her, and the supper continued.

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